

## BLESSINGS AND WOES<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Trinity, 5 November 2023**

When I saw the readings for Matins this morning and considered the need for a relatively short sermon at this service, I thought that it might be better to leave the meaning of Daniel's apocalyptic vision to another time. I chose instead to concentrate on the apparently easier reading from Luke's gospel.

Jesus has just been atop a mountain and chosen his 12 apostles. He brings them down with him to rejoin his other followers, at least 70 of them, if we note the numbers elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> He speaks to them, and the crowd members get to listen in.

What he says sounds both familiar and different. Is this another version of the Sermon on the Mount? Many scholars have thought so and have called this version the Sermon on the Plain. Others conclude that they are different events. I won't bore you with the details of these discussions, which have gone on from St Augustine to the present day.<sup>3</sup>

What is most notable about this sermon is the contrasting presentation of blessings and woes. The blessings seem more direct than those in Matthew, while the woes turn the blessings upside down. Then follow some instructions about how to treat one's enemies, ending with what we often call the "Golden Rule", "Do to others what you would have them do to you".

How are we to treat these instructions? It is important that we do not treat them as a new set of rules, condemning ourselves to a lifetime of breaking them. Neither should we treat them as unattainable ideals to be stored away in a display cabinet of beautiful ideas.

Jesus spoke these words into an unfriendly environment. The land was occupied by Roman conquerors. Its so-called *Pax Romana* was maintained by a repressive regime that treated the world as its own and subcontracted order to ruthless vassals such as the Herod family. The Roman peace did not extend to ensuring the well being of any other than themselves. Even at this early stage in his ministry, Jesus must have known his fate, even if the details were not clear.

The world of 1662, in which the liturgy for morning prayer was set, was also far from peaceful. Its Book of Common Prayer was part of an attempt to restore religious and civil order after the turmoil of the Commonwealth. The monarchy and the bishops were restored, but as might be expected, not everyone was happy. Despite the failure of the Commonwealth, many of its supporters were still around. Despite the restoration of the episcopal order, the Presbyterian-based Puritans still sought a different church. In the larger society, the regicides, particularly those who signed the death warrant for Charles I, were hunted down and cruelly executed. The famous King Alfred is reported to have said, "Men prate much of the Golden Rule, but prefer to use the iron one."<sup>4</sup> It seems that he was right.

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Psalm 111, 117; Daniel 7.1-18; Luke 6.17-31

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10

<sup>3</sup> David Lyell Jeffrey, *Luke*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Grand Rapids, Baker Publishing, 2012, pp. 88-98

<sup>4</sup> [George Herbert on JSTOR](#)

We have no need to criticise the past, as though we were enlightened. We find ourselves in comparable times of war, violence, revenge, and counterattack. The sermon on the plain is as incomprehensible to us as it has been to our ancestors. And what then shall we say?

Tom Wright says that this gospel reading, and the section that follows it, is not so much a set of rules as suggestions about an attitude of heart. He says:

In fact, this list of instructions is all about which God you believe in – and about the way of life that follows as a result. ... [Jesus] was speaking of what he knew: the extravagant love of his Father, and the call to live a lavish human life in response. And finally, when they struck him on the cheek and ripped the coat and shirt off his back, he went on loving and forgiving, as Luke will tell us later.<sup>5</sup>

We should not live with any expectation that the world will follow what Jesus says. But we should not, therefore, discard his words. Within our control is the form of the community in which we live and worship. That is where the words of Jesus must be potent. Who knows with what effect? Change must start somewhere.

R S Thomas comments on the nature of the kingdom that appears in today's gospel:

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you will purge yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone Book 4), SPCK, pp. 74-75

<sup>6</sup> R S Thomas, 'The Kingdom', in *Selected Poems*, London, Penguin, 2003, p. 91. [Thy Kingdom Come.pdf](http://metanoiaiaproject.co.uk)  
([metanoiaiaproject.co.uk](http://metanoiaiaproject.co.uk))



James J. Tissot, "The Exhortation to the Apostles" (1886-94),  
Brooklyn Museum, New York.