

## Luke 6:20 - 26 The Beatitudes

Many of you know that Peter and I often travel to Madeira. When we're there we go to a Mass in English along with many other visitors. The retired priest - he's 80 now - who celebrates is a bit of a maverick. With other local Christians he's set up a charity called People Helping People to help desperate Madeirans who have dropped through the cracks of welfare provision and this is funded by donations from us visitors after every Sunday Mass. When we are home we get the church bulletin every week by email, and this week I was very moved by something Father Bernardino wrote. Which I am now going to read to you.

*Cindy was living in extreme poverty. The first time we visited her cave (no resemblance with a house) we had to climb 80 steps to see her. This in the attractive and touristic city of Funchal in Madeira. Cindy was born in the Azores from a relationship between a Portuguese mother and an American soldier. At two years old she went to the USA, where she grew up in a very bad family environment. It was very common to see her mother being «visited» regularly by strange men.*

*She grew up and inevitably was herself involved in crime. After doing her time in horrible prisons she was deported to her country, i.e. Portugal, and ended up in Madeira looking for horticultural work after the floods of 2010. However Cindy spent many years in Madeira and never found a job (or maybe she never kept a job).*

*She slept on the streets. One day she showed me the «best» garbage cans where she used to find her «meals». Drugs, alcohol and cheap prostitution were part of her life. We paid rent for different houses but it never worked. She wanted to go back to the USA but every time we tried, her visa was denied. We were completely lost without knowing what to do. We really loved Cindy. People Helping People is not about judging and domesticating people but about loving and helping people until the last consequences.*

*One day, after so much effort, prayer and love for Cindy, we convinced her to see a psychiatrist who admitted her into a mental institution. After some time Cindy didn't want to stay there and the psychiatrist told us that she could not be forced to stay against her will.*

*We never forgot what the psychiatrist told us. That was an epiphany for us. His words changed our way of looking at the poor and are still in our minds. His words were very simple: «Her head doesn't work like ours».*

*Every time we deal with people who prefer wine rather than milk, prefer cigarettes rather than bread, prefer to sleep on the streets rather than to have a decent job, who prefer begging rather than working, we repeat the words «Her head does not work like ours».*

In our reading today Jesus described Cindy. Poor, hungry, weeping, excluded and reviled. That's not surprising - we know Jesus wants us to love others, to be aware of those who need us to be good Samaritans.

But what is surprising is that Jesus says, Blessed is Cindy. Hooray for Cindy! Cindy possesses the Kingdom of God. Cindy will be satisfied, Cindy will be laughing, Cindy will receive great rewards in heaven.

Note: There is nothing here, in Luke's Beatitudes, about 'Blessed is the good person who works his socks off' (like Father Andrade and his team). Nothing about anyone earning a reward. The poor are blessed because they will be - well - blessed - with good things.

(Interestingly Matthew's account of Jesus' words seems to come from a less worldly, more spiritual perspective -it's about things like being humble, spiritually poor and meek. Also important, But today the Church directs our attention to Luke which is less subtle - and has a matching set of Woes - Unbeatitudes.

For these let us imagine another woman, Sally - perhaps Father Andrade meets her to take her wedding service. Sally grew up in a loving family and worked hard in education which resulted in a well-paid job and a comfortable lifestyle. The wedding is celebrated with feasting and laughter and the speeches quite genuinely refer to her lovely nature, her generosity and selfless attention to the needs of others. She is already both blessed and a blessing. Jesus described Sally too, in our reading.

Woe to Sally. Down with Sally? Boo Hiss for Sally? Too bad for Sally? So happy now but with trouble looming - hunger, mourning and weeping.

Jesus is making SHOCKING points. Jesus does make shocking points quite often - but centuries of culture change and of reading the scriptures with reverence have acted as shock absorbers!

For example, next week we are going to hear Jesus say 'Love your enemies' which familiarity might have softened for us - but does that mean we should let back into the country an unrepentant Jihadi Bride?

A comparison has been made between Jesus and some stand-up comedians. You know the sort of joke which takes something we accept as normal and not worthy of a mention and brings it into startling significance? The best of these raise a question - Why do we do this thing? Should we do this thing? Is there more to this than meets the eye?

Again from next week's reading - when Jesus says - 'if someone asks you for your cloak, make sure you give him your tunic too'. Jesus is not just making a point with exaggeration. Those listening to him would be giggling at this, at least, if not laughing uproariously. Because in that place and time, people only did wear a tunic and a cloak. So if you gave both of those away - well you would be naked! Nobody would have thought Jesus literally meant strip naked but they would have got the point. Jesus knew how to grab our attention.

Back to our difficult Beatitudes. In Jesus' day, as in ours too sometimes, the general assumption was that rich people must be smart and good, and that poor people must be stupid and bad. Both therefore got their just rewards. These are the values which underpin so much of society.

Jesus tore all that apart. Woe to the successful, blessings to the very least. Listen you lot - he was jolting his hearers - which includes us - out of unthinking complacency and into an awareness of the Kingdom of God - that place where we try to see the world from God's point of view and act as Jesus would act.

Somebody said that we are often like a child playing in a muddy puddle in the carpark, when, if only we looked up, spread out before us is a whole sandy beach with pools and waves and miles to run and dig and splash.

Having questions raised for us is like a prompt to look around and see the whole landscape.

This reading from Luke is too hard for me to have anything but questions to offer you. And I have spent all week thinking about it.

Here are some of the questions which Luke's Beatitudes prompt for me:

- Does this mean God loves people like Cindy more than people like Sally?
- Does God care about success? What does being 'Blessed' mean?
- Isn't there always the possibility of trouble ahead for any of us? How important is my bank balance and full larder anyway?
- What assumptions or judgements do I make about people?
- Can I bring hope into hopeless situations? Is there a difference between providing solutions and offering hope?

Father Bernardino ended his story: *Cindy took her own life and I presided over her funeral. We are still grieving for Cindy and for all the Cindys of the world who are accused, judged and condemned without being heard and loved. «When we start by judging we have no time to love».*

God of Love, your son gave us some hard messages. Please help us to keep looking for the meaning. Bring your Kingdom into being among us as we become people helping people. In Jesus' Name Amen.