

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Sunday February 16 2025



ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

20 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 2BU

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

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Almost exactly a quarter of a century ago, in January 2000, I was released from prison after serving an 18-month sentence for perjury.

By February, I was in the process of moving out of my comfortable house in Lord North Street, just 300 yards up the road from St Matthew's.

And I was packing my suitcase to move into a less comfortable, basement student flat which was going to be the next stop on my life's journey.

That next stop, I sometimes joke, took me into to the only institution in Britain which had worse food than a prison and more uncomfortable beds than a prison.

It was an Anglican Theological College – Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

Despite my jests about its food, I spent two happy and fulfilled years at Wycliffe.

But like many a new boy at a new school, I did not start well.

I will always remember the first weekly essay I was set by Wycliffe's Principal, Professor Alister McGrath, the Regius Professor of Divinity no less.

His question was:

"To what extent was Jesus of Nazareth a political figure?"

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Despite my foolish presumption that I already knew something political figures, I wrote a rather inadequate 3,000-word answer and only got a B minus mark for it.

Let's hope I can do a bit better today.

Now the reason why I am mentioning this is because, rather surprisingly, the challenge posed by this morning's reading is not all that different from the challenge of that Wycliffe essay question 25 years ago.

The challenge is this:

What do we think Jesus was trying to achieve with what is often called "The Sermon on the Plain"?

Of course, he was delivering a powerful spiritual message to his disciples and followers.

But make no mistake, he was also sending a disturbing, almost revolutionary, political message to the world.

We can get a feel for the importance of the Sermon on the Plain by looking at the circumstances surrounding it.

The verses just before our Reading say that Jesus had spent the whole of the previous night up a mountain in prayer.

As a result of those prayers, he had chosen his twelve disciples.

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Then he had come down from the mountain to a level place – a plain – to preach to a huge audience –

“A great multitude” Luke tells us.

Some of them were already His followers, who knew about His extraordinary power as a healer.

Others seem to have been rather posh, well-heeled people, who had travelled long distances from Tyre, Sidon or Jerusalem, perhaps out of curiosity rather than conviction.

Jesus had a disturbing message for all parts of the crowd.

His opening Beatitudes, as recorded by Luke from this Sermon on the Plain were shorter and subtly different

from His Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew's Gospel.

In Luke's version Jesus does NOT say that the

- poor,
 - the hungry,
 - the mournful
 - and the persecuted
- are blessed because they are
- poor,
 - hungry,
 - mourning

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– or persecuted.

No. The reason Jesus tells them they are blessed is a message of hope.

He is saying that God is going to change their situation.

Note the future tenses here as Jesus promises that:

- The hungry will be filled
- Those who weep will laugh
- And the persecuted will receive the same reward the ancient prophets received when they were persecuted.

So what Jesus is signalling here is that His Kingdom is a topsy turvy, upside down Kingdom.

A Kingdom where the normal rules of society's status quo will be reversed.

He is promising a revolutionary world where

- the marginalised,
- the ignored,
- the exploited,
- the ridiculed,
- the poor,
- the hungry
- and the unhappy

are going to be blessed.

As Jesus put it, in His Kingdom:

"The first will be last and the last will be first."

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And, as if this were not enough to get the well-heeled parts of the crowd shifting uneasily in their first-class seats, Jesus hits out even harder against those who are self-satisfied and complacent.

For in the second half of the Sermon on the Plain – the Woes section – Jesus vows

that when His Kingdom comes, today's winners will be tomorrow's losers.

As Jesus says to them in Verse 24 (addressing the rich):
"You have received your consolation".

So the Sermon on the Plain is an uncomfortable message.

Putting both halves of it together

If you were trying to find a punchy headline for it, you might say:

Jesus will comfort the afflicted – and afflict the comfortable.

* * *

I am sure the crowd who heard the Sermon on the Plain got the message.

But do we get it today?

Let's apply that question to one verse, a verse which, alas, has been all too topical here in the Church of England during the week of the Synod.

Amusingly, I heard one commentator on the radio calling it the Zynod –

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with a Z –

- because he said it was more like a zoo than an assembly of humans.

Not an exaggeration but a caricature too far perhaps, but he had a point.

Which can be seen by focussing on Verse 22 of our Reading.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, revile you and defame you.”

There has been far too much hating, reviling and defaming within our Church in recent months.

It has not been coming from the silent majority in the pews.

Here at St Matthew's and in most other churches, the figures show that congregation numbers have been rising in the past year as we just quietly get on with it.

“It” being God's work of prayer, worship, fellowship, loving our neighbours, and service to the Lord.

Meanwhile, the noise, often unpleasant noise, is coming from groups of self-appointed campaigners, journalists with agendas and senior clerics on manoeuvres.

The old saying, “Dog don't eat dog” seems to have been replaced in some mitre-wearing circles with the attitude:

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But it is becoming OK for "dog collar to bite dog collar."

Of course, we know that in our Church of England we have had our safeguarding problems and our failures, as for that matter have schools, colleges, and all sorts of institutions - even entire local communities have been scarred by grooming gangs.

In such circumstances, of course our hearts overflow with support and sympathy for the victims of abuse.

But, as a matter of fairness and justice, we cannot abandon fundamental principles such as the presumption of innocence and the Natural Justice rule of hearing proper evidence from both sides.

Sadly, some of the campaigners seem to have entered the mindset of the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* who shouted "Sentence first! Verdict afterwards!"

I believe we hold a particularly insightful view of these controversies here at St Matthew's.

That's because none of us will forget the nobility and forbearance of our much-loved local parishioner, Bishop Chris Lowson, a long-standing member of our congregation and now the star of our volunteer Clergy team.

We will not forget that he had to undergo months of suspicious suspension before he was restored with honour to his See as Bishop of Lincoln.

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I know that many of us were sad to see how Archbishop Justin Welby was, perhaps unavoidably, pushed into resignation, even though he had moved institutional mountains to improve safeguarding in the Church and had achieved more than any other Prelate in this field.

* * *

Today, we are so pleased to be able to welcome to our congregation the former Bishop of Liverpool, John Perumbalath, well known to some of us at St Matthew's. He has had a bruising week which ended with him feeling that he had to resign for reasons which, to put it mildly, are unsubstantiated and unproven.

John, you and your wife Jessie – you are hugely welcome to St Matthew's.

If, at the moment, you feel a little downcast or even tearful, be encouraged by Verse 21 of our Reading.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

As you well know and as some of us well know,

It can be agonisingly painful going through life's rough passages.

The wounds from such dramas do hurt, but they can – and will – heal.

Be encouraged by one sentence from our Reading, describing the scene at the Sermon on the Plain:

“And all in the crowd were trying to touch Him

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For power came out of Him

And healed all of them.”

May you Bishop John, and all who have been afflicted, hear the promise of the Sermon on the Plain.

And may you and all of us be healed by the power of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

AMEN