

Address by Howard Friend for Sunday, February 13th 2022

And Jesus came down - with his disciples - to a level place. So began our Gospel reading – of the Sermon on the Plain - in contrast with the account in Matthews Gospel – The Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is described as going up a mountain.

Are they just different versions of the same event or events – quite possibly. The Matthian account destined for a Jewish audience and this one in Luke for a Gentile or more inclusive, one.

So, was Jesus half way up a mountain or indeed half way down as some would have it – the compromise position - Sermon on the Plateau?

Is being half way up the stairs the same as being half way down? (As in 'The place where I sit'.)

Fans of AA Milne or perhaps the Muppets will have their own view on that.

And no - I'm not going to sing that song – you'll be relieved to hear.

But I do want to talk about being down on the plain - on a level place - because for me this is the essence of Luke's interpretation of Jesus's teaching. And it's Luke's pitch - if you like - that has grasped my attention – this time round - looking at the Beatitudes.

For me - Luke's implied direction of travel of the disciples - from up a mountain - where they had been called by Jesus – as recounted in the few verses just before our Gospel reading - to being down and among the crowd on the plain - is highly significant.

I think Luke is encouraging us here to:-

Get down and get real.

Luke 'The Good Doctor' as he was nicknamed by Paul, his travelling companion, I'm sure, had a working understanding of the problem that Jesus addresses here in these beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor

Woe to you who are rich

I think he knew first-hand knowledge of what Wilkinson and Pickett the Nottingham University Epidemiologists described brilliantly in their book *The Spirit Level*. Their acclaimed and much quoted research showed that countries where there is a wide polarity of wealth, the UK for example, have more health problems and social dysfunction than say our Scandanavian neighbours where that inequality of wealth is less. Politicians at the time of publication got excited about the policy implications of

this research and I'm sure it's informing the present political talk of Levelling Up and indeed Levelling Down.

But I'm not here to make a political point this morning. It's the personal and church implications of this problem that I want to concentrate on.

I want to encourage us in this church, like Luke, to:-

Get down and get real.

Because this is what Jesus did. He blessed and got alongside the poor, the sick and disadvantaged and he challenged the Rich and privileged.

There's an earthiness about Luke's Beatitudes isn't there, not found in Matthews account:

Blessed are the poor (not the poor in Spirit)

Blessed are the Hungry (not those who hunger and thirst after righteousness)

Blessed are those who cry and who suffer for my name.

And the Woes. Found only on Luke's plain. We can't sidestep the Woes.

Woe to you who are rich, and well fed, and who are well thought of.

This is Luke the doctor speaking – someone who has witnessed at first hand the consequences of the inequalities of society.

And I can identify with that – as some of you will know -I'm a retired medic and have spent many years in Malawi working for Dfid and the Foreign Office, working with some of the very poorest – but also with the rich and self-important.

I want to tell you about a woman whose actions and approach greatly influenced me as a Medical Student in London in the 70s.

She taught me how to

Get down and get real

Which is my theme this morning. (In case you had dozed off)

Dr Cecily Saunders - as many of you know - was the founder of the modern Hospice movement. During my training I elected to have a two week attachment at St Christopher's Hospice in South London, where she was Consultant in charge. I went on ward rounds with her and generally followed her around. Her approach to her patients revolutionised my thinking and practice. Instead of standing at the foot of the bed and looking down on the patients as the totally aloof Consultants did at the Middlesex - she got a chair and sat down or knelt down by her patients. She listened to them and tried to understand their worries and made a treatment plan with them.

She levelled with them.

She got down and she got real.

I have never forgot that.

I think this is what Luke is encouraging us to do with his interpretation of Jesus's teaching – The Beatitudes.

Now what about the implications of this observation for our churches. Well firstly I've come to realise just how much people in this church / parish do along the lines of what one might call 'Love in Action':

Prison Visiting

YMCA

Homeless support

Hospiscare

Food banks

And there are no doubt other activities or services like these that I'm not aware of. You are Blessing the poor and disadvantaged. You are:-

Getting down and getting real.

And you deserve commendation – and our encouragement.

And those of us who are not so involved need to look at ourselves and ask how we can get involved either in direct action, or in prayer or perhaps financially.

Ah - and - here's the rub:

We are a relatively wealthy church – that is to say we are mostly affluent - and we can't escape this:

'Woe to you who are rich'
challenge.

What are we, who are well off, who have assets or disposable income, doing about redressing the balance of inequality in our society.

We have to face this challenge. Financial support of some of our church related activities is an option, there are plenty of others. What is not an option for the Christian is to sit on a pot of gold.

Back to AA Milne – for some light relief – perhaps.

And here I might ruffle a few more 'Christopher Robin' like feathers.

I suggest - in line with my theme of :-

Get down and get real

That Half way up or down the stairs is not the place we should chose to sit and ponder in droopy Edwardian nostalgia.

- Neither should we be in the nursery at the top of the stairs, with its implication of wealth and privilege but rather at the bottom of the stairs – in the town – in the real world.

For after all – in the words of Paul to the Philippians:

Let your attitude be the same as that of Christ Jesus

Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be held on to but made himself nothing and took the nature of a servant. Being made in human likeness, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross.

Jesus came down to our level

Jesus got down and got real

So should we.