



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, February 17, 2019

*The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany*

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Jeremiah 17:5-10 | Psalm 1 | I Corinthians 15:12-20 | Luke 6:17-26

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do Christ's words in this morning's gospel leave you confused? He starts off with the familiar, "Blessed are..." But where are the meek, the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, those model of spiritual sanctity? Well, they live in St. Matthew's version of this sermon. And what about these woes that St. Luke includes? Can we find ourselves somewhere in that list of people whom Jesus seems to denounce? I had just finished a rather substantial dinner on Tuesday evening, when I sat down in my most comfortable chair and put my feet up to start preparing for this Sunday by reading today's lessons. So much for living up the standards of the gospel. So, where did all of this come from?

It seems that when Matthew and Luke got to the point of recalling Jesus' big sermon, which opens with what we know as the Beatitudes, they worked from a common source and fashioned their own unique versions that spoke to them, and their communities' memories of Jesus. But, memory is a funny thing and not always as clear as we would like it to be.

The Gospel is not evidence in a trail. It is an expression of Faith. The Church is not a courtroom. It is a sanctuary for anyone who seeks a deeper knowledge of God. Just because Matthew and Luke retell the same story in different ways, doesn't mean we have to, or can, believe one and discard the other. If that were the case we would end up throwing out nearly half the Bible. It's full of variations, repetitions that don't quite line up, and downright contradictions. What these differences do mean is that if we want to get at the truth, we have to make the effort to look below the surface, and seek what is really being said. To do anything less would be the spiritual equivalent of believing only what we want to hear, and ignoring everything else. As expedient as that method may be, it eventually catches up with us with serious consequences.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus spoke in familiar terms that people would understand. Poverty, hunger, sorrow and exclusion were not abstract concepts to his audience. These were everyday realities. No one around Jesus had to be told what it was like to be poor, or in pain, or looked down upon. They

lived it every day. Jesus begins his ministry by promising a kingdom, fulfillment, joy and acceptance – wrongs made right.

That seems pretty clear cut, doesn't it? Us vs. Them; one group is good, the other is bad; the class struggle laid out in terms of divine reward and retribution. Sounds like a political campaign, doesn't it? But is that what Jesus is saying? Remember, this is a man who was supported by some generous patrons; who, from what we know, except for one dramatic episode of self-imposed fasting at the beginning of his ministry, never went hungry a day of his life; who enjoyed a good time as much as anyone; and though he died a horrible death, virtually alone, had also enjoyed enormous popularity during his life.

Jesus isn't saying that poverty and hunger are preferred states of life. He saw the havoc those evils bring to humanity. Jesus isn't saying that we should seek lives of sorrow and loneliness. He knows how these burdens can crush a spirit. He wants to relieve us of those things.

But also, Jesus wasn't trying to sell his listeners some worthless pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by kind of hope -- 'endure your misery now, (and please, do so quietly) so you can be rewarded later.' That's a charlatan's message. Jesus does offer some clarity, and acceptance, and peace, which a relationship with the world can never fully give. Everything we might hope to get from the world requires a struggle of some sort in order to procure it. Then that struggle usually escalates as we try to hold onto it. Both Luke and Matthew agree that Jesus viewed that as ultimately futile.

In this odd rendering of his most famous sermon, Jesus says, stop fighting a war you can't win. Stop chasing after a way of life that only depletes us. Stop confusing things with blessings. Follow me, Jesus says, and help me build my father's kingdom -- that's where you will find what you seek and all that you need. He asks us to set aside a relationship that gives us nothing, and embrace a new relationship with God through him. Jesus isn't offering us heaven on earth, but he is offering us a heavenly way of life.

With this offer we must make a choice; and woe be to us if we choose poorly.