

19 FEBRUARY 2025 A REFLECTION Rev Wayne Toleafoa

BLESSED ARE YOU

Readings: Jeremiah 17: 1-10; I Corinthians 15: 12-20; Luke 16: 17-26

We don't really realize how blessed we are until we travel to poorer countries, or to countries that are so rich that they don't seem to have the time or the will to care for others. We live in a kind of splendid isolation, here at the bottom of the globe.

You and I are 'blessed' in so many ways, even when we take that blessed state for granted.

Today, we're also having a bit of fun in our church by (some of us) dressing up in our Art Deco costumes to remember the resilient people of Hawke's Bay from in the 1930s. We will also be enjoying some baking with recipes of the 1930s.

We are also remembering the second anniversary of Cyclone Gabrielle and the people most affected by that disaster which seems as though it was yesterday.

This weekend is Art Deco weekend, when we particularly celebrate the resilience of the community of Hawke's Bay.

Most of you who were born and raised in Hawke's Bay know the local stories. Stories that are both tragic and inspirational.

At 10:47 am on 3 February 1931 an earthquake struck the Hawke's Bay region and devastating the buildings and homes of thousands in the Hawke's Bay region. There were over 50 aftershocks which kept everyone on edge for the next few weeks after.

The official death toll was 256. The Napier earthquake memorial lists 258 names. Of these, 161 people were in Napier, 93 in Hastings and two in Wairoa.

The cities of Napier and Hastings were basically flattened and thousands of people were forced to live in makeshift villages until the cities and towns could be rebuilt.

Help came from around the country and the Royal NZ Navy played a special role in the recovery. The HMS Veronica happened to be near Napier. The initial communications were relayed from the ship and officers and sailors were involved in the initial response, rescuing people from the rubble.

The relationship with the RNZN continues to this day with representatives of the RNZN coming down to Napier each year during the Art Deco week. On Friday the RNZN Band put on a concert at the Napier Sound shell. The bell of the HMS Veronica is laid up in Napier.

From the ashes of the earthquake, the two cities were rebuilt, and they were built in the Art Deco style of the 1930s.

10 years after the quake, the principal of Napier Girls High remarked that Napier looked far better now, than it ever had before.

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to compare the recovery to a kind of resurrection. A concept that is very familiar to all Christians. The idea of death and resurrection lies behind much of what we believe. When we are at the worst point in our lives we can hope in a resurrection.

Our readings today talk about 'being blessed.'

In our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, being blessed comes with 'conditions'. If you trust in God and if you obey God, you are blessed.

"Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. And you are not blessed, if you put your trust in human strength and human effort. Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD."

The Old Testament view of life is very similar to the common-sense view of life, that says, 'You reap what you sow'. You get what you deserve. But that is not always true. We don't always get what we deserve. Cancer for instance, can strike the best and the worst of us.

Jesus' message was more about 'grace' (undeserved favour) than about rewards for good behaviour.

The problem with today's gospel reading is that there are two versions of the Beatitudes in the gospels. One version in Matthew 5 and the other in our reading from Luke 6, today. Most Bible scholars agree that both accounts are about the same event. Jesus preaching a sermon to his disciples.

Yesterday at the Blokes Brekky we were asked to name an historical figure we would like to meet. Of course, I chose Jesus. And the reason is that I would like to find out what he actually said – especially where the gospels do not quite match up, or seem to contradict one another. 'What did Jesus actually say?'

I'd like to share a story with you which I have shared with many of my Roman Catholic friends – all of whom found the story funny.

The story goes that the pope wanted to find out what Jesus actually said about celibacy and being celibate (i.e. priests not marrying or having sexual relationships).

So he called a great Benedictine scholar and said, 'Go down into the archives and find the actual words Jesus said about being celibate.'

The Benedictine is down in the archives for several days. So the pope sends an aid down to find out how the Benedictine is getting on. When the aid gets down to the archives he finds the Benedictine scholar weeping over a manuscript.

‘Sir’, said the aid, ‘The Holy Father wants to know if you have anything to report. What did Jesus say about being celibate? And the Benedictine replies: ‘Tell the Holy Father the word he used was ‘CELEBRATE!’

I would like to know what Jesus actually said in his Beatitudes.

St Luke never actually met Jesus. He was not one of the disciples. Luke was a historian who gathered his information about Jesus from many different sources. He probably had access to the first written gospel - the Gospel of Mark, which helped to inform his own version of Jesus’ life.

The rest of his information came from eyewitnesses. You can imagine the variation in people’s accounts of the same incident. The variation in what they could remember, decades after Jesus’ ascension.

In 1906 Dr Albert Schweitzer of African Missionary fame, published a book called “The Quest (or Search) for the Historical Jesus”. He wanted to find out what Jesus actually said and what he actually believed. He came to the conclusion that Jesus was a Jewish mystic of his time, with an apocalyptic vision of the world coming to an end – ushering in the kingdom of heaven.

In the 1990s, a group of reputable Biblical Scholars calling themselves ‘The Jesus Seminar’ went through Jesus’ sayings, one by one, including the Beatitudes and the Lords Prayer, to try and decide what Jesus actually said. They too came up against the difficulty of proving what Jesus actually said and believed.

What choice do we have today? The only choice is to fall back on the gospels and try to explain the discrepancies in the gospels.

For a start, we know that Matthew’s gospel addresses a mainly Jewish audience and Luke’s a Gentile audience.

When we look at Mathew’s version of the Beatitudes, we see a much fuller, ‘spiritualized’ version than Luke’s Beatitudes.

Matthew’s version has been called, ‘The Sermon on The Mount’

Luke’s harsher, cut-down version of the Beatitudes has been labelled, ‘The Sermon on the Plain’.

‘Blessed are you who are poor’ (in Luke), in Matthew’s version, it becomes ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’. A warmer, spiritualized version of Luke’s account.

Luke's version is very harsh on the rich:

²⁴ 'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ 'Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. 'Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.'

Matthew's version does not include this section of 'woes'.

Some scholars might explain Luke's version by saying that we must look at what is called by scholars the 'Sitz im Leben'- a German word for the social and religious setting/context that the Bible passage addresses.

It is possible that Luke's gospel addressed a context where rich Christians were indifferent to the poverty of their fellow Christians. The 'woes' in Luke's gospel are addressed to these rich Christians. A warning to be compassionate and not look down on their poorer Christian brethren.

What are we to believe?

We can choose to believe the whole gospel, knowing that there are differences in what was recorded. That there are problems in translation.

Despite these problems, there are parts of the gospel that will convict us. Parts that will encourage us. Parts that will create hope. All the things that Jesus did for people in his time. The character and the Spirit of Jesus is still captured and reflected in the gospels and in the Letters and the Book of Acts and in Revelation.

All these sources of information help us to discover the person and character of Jesus.

Jesus convicted people's consciences. He encouraged the broken-hearted and healed the sick and created hope wherever he went. In his presence, people felt closer to God than they had ever felt before.

Jesus still does that today, through the gospels about his life. And He still does that today through the Holy Spirit – convicting, encouraging, healing and creating hope.

This Art Deco Weekend, and every day, we remember that Christ was involved in all aspects of human life - our triumphs and successes and our tragedies and disasters.

He suffered our human suffering. Died our human death, but behind every story of Jesus, is the story of the resurrection, offering us hope in this life and in the life to come.

F S HS Amen.