

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

I've Got Some Good News For You

One of the loveliest experiences possible is when we have the joy of telling someone good news. Sometimes it is news people have been waiting to hear, like an anxious person who's undergone medical tests: *It's all right, it's something easy to cure.* Sometimes it's an unlooked-for happiness: *we're offering you a marvellous job, guess who's coming home, we've won a prize.* The best sort of news is the sort we have a share in causing: *I've found you a way out, I've managed to solve your problems, I'd like to offer you a fortune!*

Beatitude

Today's Gospel gives us good news which is very specific: but there's a sting in the tail. I enjoy reading this Gospel, it's very stimulating of thought. *Happy the poor* - great! At last something for which I qualify! It's amazing how often I miss out on these benefits, and now here's a turn-up for the books. *A Kingdom for the poor*; splendid news, and no more than we deserve...but just a minute, what's this: *Alas for you who are rich, you are having your consolation now.* Hm. Pause for thought. Am I really rich or poor? It's true that in a country where people have fine houses, two sorts of car, and lots of trimmings I might look ordinary. On the other hand, in a world where pot-bellied children die of thirst I look pretty well-heeled. Which is the truth? Am I blessed, or cursed? And how is it so difficult to decide?

Mysterious Words

There's a mystery in what Jesus says. We have these categories: poor or rich, hungry or full-fed, weeping or laughing. The first sorts are all blessed, the second all cursed. Yet I think of myself as *blessed* only when I'm well-off, satisfied, and laughing; and that's a curse for me. And when I'm poor, unsatisfied and weeping, I call myself *miserable*; and that's when I'm being blessed! How does this resolve itself? More disturbingly, I seem to spend a good proportion of my time trying to make myself rich, well-fed, and amused. Must I think I'm actually courting a curse in all that? And is Jesus asking me to *make* myself miserable for the sake of it, for some mean purpose of his own? That sounds more like a human con-trick than a divine mystery: perhaps Marx was right about religion being a tool of exploitation, opium for the people to make them forget they're being fruited by the rich, all in the name of pie-in-the-sky-when

you-die. Where, by the way, is the "good news" I was promised?

No Cop-outs, Please

We're listening to Luke here, and there are no escape-hatches: you can't claim to be "poor in spirit", as you might in conversation with St Matthew, and then keep as rich in earthly goods as you like. This is plain enough: *rich* is *cursed*, and *poor* is *blessed*. If you can honestly claim you're poor, you can relax. But if you find yourself to be rich, then you've got problems. And I want to include myself as a priest, lest anyone should think I'm taking cheap shots at those who are compelled to earn as much as possible and pay mortgages and feed families: we're all on our mettle, in reading this Gospel, to find some sense in which we qualify as *poor* - in the simplest, plainest meaning of the word.

Set Your Hearts On The Kingdom

I think that the Beatitudes in Luke are asking us for one thing: that we should set our hearts where true treasure is to be found. All the time I find myself getting obsessed with this or that good idea which is, I'm sure, going to bring blessing with its realisation. Time and again it proves to be an illusion, and you can get quite embittered; indeed, I meet a lot of people these days who *are* well and truly embittered by their lives. You can tell them by a certain sullenness, a hard edge in the mind, and a sadness that brings them near to tears if they let any tenderness get to them. It's a pity to lose your power to hope by trusting in another human being, or in a particular set of possessions, and being let down or betrayed, radically disappointed. The Gospel knows that no human being, no earthly possession, can be trusted as the ultimate meaning of our life. If you trust in them like that, you will come to grief. True wealth, therefore, lies in a trusting that won't lead to betrayal. And maybe that's easier for someone who hasn't got a lot of false things to confide in, someone who has empty hands now. Now, the deeds that empty out the wealth that betrays us - in the ultimate sense - and makes room for the true wealth that comes from God's promises - are our share in the hope of the Kingdom. Now, the Kingdom lies in the future: but it is truly coming. So is the season of Lent. Let's use Lent this year to make a space for the Kingdom to come - in me, in you, in our Parish!

Fr Philip