

Believing is Seeing

A sermon for the third Sunday before Lent, 2025, All Saints Kings Heath
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[Jeremiah 17:5-10](#) and [1 Corinthians 15:12-20](#)

GOSPEL READING [Luke 6:17-26](#)

The wealthy man has an idea. He wants to bulldoze away the rubble of Gaza and build new roads, golf resorts, restaurants, hotels: a kind of American theme park on the glittering East coast of the Mediterranean. This is what counts as prosperity to such a man. If you visited such a place, all golf and lobster and Cadillacs, what would you think of it? How would it feel? Does it have depth? Do you find it sumptuous or gaudy? Would you wonder who was serving your meal and where they lived? Yes, where are the people?

This part of the wealthy man's vision was very telling. The people who have called this land their home for centuries should, he said, be taken in by neighbouring Arab countries where they can "live out their lives in peace." Was that a sensitive, peaceable phrase, or was it really saying, "we don't want you? We want you to fade into oblivion."

Beside him, Prime Minister Netanyahu grins, blinking in the bright light of celebrity and wealth, his pleasure in apparent recognition from the wealthy man rather pathetic. He isn't so wealthy, but he had the power to reduce Gaza to rubble, slaughter thousands and turn the tap of food aid on and off at will. Such is his vision.

Meanwhile, it is astonishing to see a long column of people – foolhardy or courageous or both? - heading back to Northern Gaza, bundles on their backs, children on top of their luggage if they're lucky enough to have some kind of trolley, their tearful embraces along the way demonstrating relationship. They want to return to the small square of rubble that was once home to begin to clear it, to see about making a fire for flat breads. Perhaps one will make a makeshift bakery; someone will assemble rows of broken chairs and give the children lessons in the mornings; you can guarantee the children will make games out of rubble; toys out of detritus. They are asking themselves, what kind of community can we grow from the rubble of the community we knew?

What kind of grinding poverty is this to behold? And yet what richness of hope and what persistent desire for return, for community, to neighbourliness.

There are conflicts elsewhere of course. We saw the bewildered silence of the Munich Security gathering as JD Vance spoke. "We didn't think you were going to talk about that." Whatever you think of him, and what he said, that surprise was as nothing compared to the surprise of the apostles, disciples and the multitude pressing in upon Jesus, eager to hear what he would say. People nervously want to hear Vance because they need to know what he is going to take off everyone. Unlike him, Jesus has brought a generous, healing power for all the people, without discrimination. That is why they want to hear him.

Jesus gives four blessings, then four mirroring woes. Anyone listening catches the momentum of the first four the, the moment the first woe comes: Woe to you who are rich, we know what's coming. Surely not, they think, but yes, full, laughing, popular. Of course, he's going to It's important to hear it as a dramatic, open air speech, not as an intellectual list to tick off,, telling us who's in and who's out. Imagine the rhetorical experience for the disciples and the crowd around them. The shock of hearing that those suffering most may be blessed. Is this offensive or

hopeful as you hear it? Then there's the shock of hearing those most fortunate being warned of woe. Such good fortune was normally seen as a sign of divine approval. "We didn't think you were going to talk about that, Jesus"

So we sit back, maybe a touch breathless, and think how he has moved us to see the world differently, to read politics and social hierarchies in a fresh way. We still have Mary's Magnificat (from Chapter 2) echoing in the heart about the mighty put down and the humble lifted up, the hungry fed and the rich sent empty away.

Let's think for a moment who he is talking to that day, so we can better understand how he's speaking to us now. Jesus had spent a night in prayer up a mountain, then out of his larger group of disciples, chosen twelve whom he called "apostles," that is people sent, bearing with them the authority of the one who sends. They come to this place and, as we heard, apart from the twelve, there was "a great crowd of his disciples" then around them the "great multitude" of variously needy people. Concentric circles of belonging. Specifically, Jesus "looked at his disciples and said...Blessed are you... Woe to you..." First his own apostles, to be sent out with his authority, then his own disciples, and then the multitude over hearing are meant to feel the shock waves of these blessings and woes.

Any thought that Jesus is shouting out from a religious sect telling the rest of the world what's wrong with them is firmly to be resisted. He is speaking to his own first, showing they (we) may at any time be rich or poor, full or hungry, laughing or crying, popular or excluded. Rather than seeing this as a settled list, he is scrambling our perception in order to clear it. We are meant to feel the dissonance, then see how the world looks while our vision tremors between notions of wealth and poverty.

So what are you hungry for, really? How satisfied are you, really? In what ways are you poor? In what ways are you rich? What makes you cry? Is there anything we don't cry about that we probably should? What is our attitude to people who are crying? Why do we apologise for it so much? Who is getting the attention? Who are we following on X? Whose voice is not being heard when it comes to shaping the future? In our culture today it may be that the celebrity and the defamed is sometimes the same person, as we have a large appetite for a press that loves to build up in order to knock down.

These blessings and woes, surging over us, unsettling our assumptions, are not a one time shock, but together a gift that keeps giving. Jesus, through Luke, is clearing our vision, offering a new way of reading situations, so we might perceive the losses wealth and popularity involve and the risks they bear with them; we might see anew the insights of the poor and the grieving, so generally treated as embarrassments. We allow Jesus rhetorically to scramble our assumptions, to shake us up so we start to see how we acquiesce in the face of structural unfairness and fixate on the distractions of wealth and celebrity. He has levelled the field. He has got us to fair.

But fair is not good enough for Jesus, as fair is only a base line for God. God knows about justice and fairness, but sees them as a mere starting point. God, it seems, is more excited about grace. Having got us to fair with this powerful overturning, Jesus then goes on to say: "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you..." These are not fair responses. They are gracious, transformative ones.

Talk about gracious transformation, Saul was blinded so he could learn to see. Re-named Paul, ascribed the authority of an Apostle, he left wonderful letters, including the ones to Corinth, where he describes the risen Jesus as the first fruits of those who sleep. He is frustrated that some are talking down the power of Jesus' resurrection, which is for him the great transformative overwhelming of injustice and even of fairness. Imagine the Israelites' first harvest in their newly

settled land. The very first fruits would be so precious. Wouldn't you hoard them and, if there's enough, give a little to the Priest as a thank you? No. Moses commanded that they bring the first tenth, not the last bits and pieces, and give them back to God. How vulnerable that must have felt. And yet how moving. For in that vulnerability is huge trust that God will give enough and that, after the desolate scarcity of slavery, the abundance stretches into the future. They are to bring first fruits every harvest.

So to describe Jesus as the first fruits of those who have died, it is as if humanity tenderly, vulnerable in grief and hope, offers Jesus back to God in trust that having raised him, God will indeed raise our loved ones, and us, to an abundant future in heaven. His generous humanity, spiritually wealthy, hungry for bread, but much more for his heavenly Father, weeping over the right things, his non-entitled, non-grasping, grateful, gracious way of being human is affirmed eternally in the resurrection. His way of seeing is the gift of the kingdom.

God is giving us a whole new way of seeing the world. His/Her/Their impulse is to overwhelm fair with transformative goodness that makes the world even more exciting. Fair seems an impossible aspiration to us. It is a rather dull, minimal option for God. God wants to see grace transforming conflict, healing division, overcoming hardness of heart, overwhelming our sense of safety and scarcity.

We allow God to clear our sight to see and read the world more clearly and wisely, not as superior or clever people, but as disciples feeling Jesus' challenging gaze most intensely on us; as a humbled Church, vision cleared to see the wealth and poverty in the world around us, as well as in our own lives, fully expecting to learn from those better placed to teach us than we to teach them.

In this sense, Luke helps us realise, Believing is Seeing.