

# Sermon

**Preacher** | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

**The Gospel** | Luke 6:17–26

**Date** | February 13, 2022



**ALL  
SAINTS'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

I was just a few weeks into my ordained life when I met Amanda. I was visiting her home to prepare her for the baptism of her daughter, Aimee. In the parish I served as a curate, in a post-industrial and somewhat depressed town in central England, it was expected on such occasions that clergy would visit people in their homes, and this was my first such house-call. Sat in her living room, mug of tea and a biscuit in hand, I began to listen to why it was that Amanda wanted her baby baptized.

The story that unfolded was, I would come to learn, fairly typical of that area. Aimee was a pre-marital baby. Life on the public housing estate was more dull than dangerous. Work was limited to unsociable shifts in the local shopping center, and the prospects for a better life for Aimee than they currently had were slim. Baptism was, therefore, something of a promissory note for Aimee's future, a commitment to her that ran deeper than paying next month's electricity bill or making the money last to buy baby food. Although not a church goer, Amanda had a clear sense of the sacramentality of baptism, that it said something about Aimee's emerging life that shouldn't be left unsaid, some essential truth about her child she could not afford to neglect.

It was clear that Amanda wanted Aimee to be baptized because it would be a visible sign of that invisible truth that she valued her child more than anything in all creation. Yet she didn't simply want her daughter to know how deeply she valued her, in a way she needed her to know, because Amanda had never felt that kind of love herself. She went on to describe how little she could believe that there was a God who loved her, because as far as she could tell she wasn't capable of being loved. All she had learned from her own parents was how little she mattered. What followed was a heartbreaking story of neglect and abuse, the very opposite of what we proclaim in our baptismal vows to honor the dignity of every human being.

I sat there, my hand gripping the mug of tea tightly, trying to take it all in. I think I had been ordained all of six weeks. What had started as a simple preparation for her child's baptism had become something far more. Somehow, Amanda and I had stumbled upon holy ground.

Waiting a while, I offered to her the only thing I knew to offer, which was what I had found to be true of my own life. I told her that while I didn't expect she could believe what I was about to say, the God I had come to know had gifted to me a truth that says that each of us is of infinite worth, each of us is accepted, each of us is loved. I told her how I had come to trust in that truth even as the world said otherwise because of my own family's story of divorce, and debt, and the dismissal we so often received at the hands of others.

There was a pause. I wasn't sure if what I had just said sounded like I hadn't listened at all to what she had shared with me. The ramblings of a wet-behind-the-ears clergyman who had spent too much time reading books and not enough time living.

And then, as an epiphany emerging seemingly out of nowhere, Amanda looked toward me and nervously asked, 'Could I be baptized too?'

'Yes, Amanda.' I said quietly. 'Yes, you can.'

Because she wanted to avoid the ridicule of her family, on the day of Aimee's baptism, after all of the babies had been taken care of, unannounced Amanda stepped forward, leaned over the font, and was marked as Christ's own forever. It was a moment for me of pure gospel. No number of years in seminary could have taught me about grace more than that. 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God'.

I wonder what you hear in that story? One thing you might be wondering, with all of those home visits, is just how much tea your average Church of England clergy-person consumes in a given year. It's a lot, I can tell you, enough in fact to safely say that should there ever be a supply-chain issue between the tea gardens of India and the vicarages of the British Isles, all meaningful ecclesiastical activity that side of the pond will cease.

Perhaps, though, you also hear something of Amanda's story in a life you know. You don't have to be poor to doubt yourself. Many of us carry memories of hurt and failure, often without even knowing how deeply they still wound us. There are several among us who over the course of the past few weeks have had to confront the pain of loss. And beyond this place, a very large number of people, many of them children, have felt the pressure of these times press upon them. We hear about the mental health crisis and the 'great resignation', the thousands who are seeking somehow to take back some control over their lives after two years of this slow and relentless pandemic. I myself have felt a kind of weightiness, a languid tiring of it all. If you have felt any of this for yourself, especially if you have not yet admitted that to anyone else out loud, please know that you are not alone, and that this is a community with a deep and profound capacity for love. Don't journey this way alone.

My sense is, that all around us many find themselves as, I found Amanda all those years ago, looking for hope. And hope is what lies at the heart of the gospel message of Luke we hear today:

"Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God."

Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh."

It is hard to believe that such things can be so in the middle hour of the struggle. Surely those first hearers of this word from Jesus must have questioned what they heard when so much of the evidence pointed them the other way. Life in occupied Judea was anything but blessed; it was immensely hard under a capricious colonial rule that saw widespread hunger and poverty.

The contrary nature of Jesus' sermon on the plain is only magnified when we consider the original Greek of the text. For the crowd around Jesus is not merely being invited to hope for a better, or a blessed future; they are being told that they will be makarios, which is best translated as 'happy'. Makarios, was at the time a concept the ancient Greeks used to refer to the gods of Olympus who were considered happy because they were spared the struggles of this earthly life. The same word was used in Hellenistic societies to describe the rich.

Jesus, therefore offers a profound inversion of received wisdom that says for those struggling with poverty, and hunger, and sadness, not to look for relief in the pleasures and apparent securities of this world - riches, power, and celebrity. Instead, the invitation is to step into a whole new dispensation for living, found in the Way of Jesus.

I suspect that many who heard Jesus that day went home thinking that the preacher was out of touch with the reality of their everyday lives - surely not the last time that has happened. Yet I also suspect that something of that word planted a seed that grew with each little epiphany, each discovery of God's grace, that enabled them to live into the kind of depth they had been searching for all along. For faith is a life that learns to orient itself to that which gives life. It is the discovery of our source, the deep place that calls to deep where we find ourselves coming home to ourselves at last.

We are a community of people also on our way home. This is a gathering of the enduringly hopeful, who have witnessed the shimmering power of grace when a human life has managed to point the way to a deeper kind of happiness that defies all circumstances. In this place, we have witnessed people who have lived through the trauma of displacement, war and persecution, arriving in this country as refugees and entering our lives as beloved children of God whose remarkable strength and endurance has shown us the depth and beauty of friendship. In this place, we have witnessed the victims of AIDS teach this community the power of faithfulness even as their own families and loved ones have disowned them. In this place, we have witnessed men who have found hope in the abyss of addiction and despair, refusing to leave the company of others they have found here, in the words of Juelz Mitchell, 'before the miracle happens'.

Grace is a miracle. It tells us that no matter how dark the valley, we simply cannot travel the Way alone, for there is always One who travels with us, whose love will never forsake us nor let us go. Grace tells us that no one is beyond hope. We need to be people of such a miracle now. We need to be people of grace. For one another and for the world around us let us be a people of that living hope. Blessed, touched by the deep happiness that God finds in you. ✦