

“Sermon on the level” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 13 February 2021. The readings were Jeremiah 17:5-10 and Luke 6:17-26.

The changes made in our country by the governments of the 1980s and 1990s were so significant that it's almost impossible now to imagine a nation without people who are poor or a world without poverty. Despite small steps to lessen the gap, the inequality introduced in those years seems now to be well entrenched. The students attending our universities to study medicine or law or economics or whatever, people we hope might lead us to a better place, have never known another world. Realistically, is it possible now to conjure up a vision of world without poverty? And even where people present us with such a vision, and there are such people, can we believe in our bones in a way that changes our living, that such a world is possible? And if we can believe such a world is possible, can we organise ourselves to bring that vision to be?

In this struggle for vision, for belief, for organisation, what of the followers of Jesus? Is there a resource into which we can tap, a resource of wisdom, of memory, of spirit, of courage? Is it possible that a very different way of seeing ourselves and our world can indeed break in upon us so we are incited to do everything we can for that world?

Luke would have us believe so. Jesus would have us believe so. It's there in the blunt words we heard read. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”

When Jesus says those words, he is standing in front of the people about whom he is speaking. He is speaking directly to people who are poor and people who are rich. He has come down from the heights, from the place where visions are disclosed, and now he is levelling with them, on level ground Luke says. Eye to eye, kanohi ki te kanohi. Direct, blunt, unavoidable.

Hey you rich, you have received your consolation. Hey, you poor, yours is the reign of God.

Jesus believes that a world without rich and poor, this world of God, has already broken in, that it is already undermining the inequality promoted by Rome. To you who are poor, this world of God is your world. To you who are rich, you already have enough. No more.

I would like to pause a moment to name the god Jesus proclaims here.

This is not a god who fits in, adapts, accommodates to the world we know. This is a different god -disturbing, disrupting, overturning the world we have come to accept, the post 1980s and 1990s world of inequality. And this god, to which we ascribe power and influence and spirit, is directly opposing all the power assembled to keep things as they are, the money, the lobbyists, the inertia, the powerlessness. The power who can reshape our imaginations, who can feed our hunger for justice, who can overturn systems, is actively working for this new world.

To be clear, when Luke writes of the poor, he is not writing as Matthew does of the spiritually poor. Luke writes of people who don't have enough to eat or drink or feed their children, of people without power.

I want to speak of a couple who turned up at church on the Sunday this passage was being read.

When they were married, they started out with few material possessions. More than what their grandparents and parents had started with to be sure, but still. This couple had managed to assemble basic furniture and each had a car they needed for work. In the first years, the bank account was tight, month by month. Sometimes they had to borrow money from their family to pay for expenses. Then the children came and the costs went up, but by then they were earning a bit more. And gradually, gradually, as they worked away, they began saving a little here and a little there, and then they bought their first house together. This was a long time ago when houses were more affordable. They had a big mortgage but they paid off the mortgage over maybe 15 years. Once they had the house, and the children left home, their equity grew, and as house prices increased so did their material wealth. They kept working and they saved and then house prices increased even more, so that on paper, mainly through owning the house, they were worth \$1M. They were now, apparently, wealthy. And they turned up at church to hear this passage read. What were they to do?

Well, they could just accept that their wealth and the relative poverty of other people was the way things were and they could do little about it except comply. They could believe that they were, basically, powerless in the face of prevailing economic theories and given the influence of those with money. At the same time, they could try to live ethically, giving to charity, doing what they could to ensure people who were poor were not more disadvantaged than the way society already treated them. They could ensure that they always spoke positively about people who were poor. This approach might be called the realist approach.

Or, despite the reading, their previous convictions were so firm that they could believe that inequality was the way things were meant to be, that this was a world in which people who were poor needed to aspire to be wealthy, that the natural goal of everyone was to be wealthy, and so it was important to ensure that there were people who were wealthy as examples of what everyone could aspire to. They could accept that an inevitable consequence of this was that some people needed to be poor. We might call this the atheist approach, that there was no other way than this way, no other god.

Or, they could struggle to know whether they were poor or wealthy. They had not set out to be wealthy. They did not aspire to it. It just happened because they kept working and the economic system did the rest. I don't know what to call that way. Maybe the indecisive approach.

Or they could feel the words of Jesus get under their skin and disturb them, with resulting feelings of awkwardness and uncertainty, wanting to learn more and to learn with others ways to give them effect. They could reflect on what influence they had, how they could exercise that influence to make it more likely that the realm of God would be more evident. They could look for others similarly committed, in the church and beyond the church, and keep learning and networking with others to overcome inequality.

Despite the awkwardness he caused, they could decide to stick with this Jesus and the people of Jesus, to keep celebrating his presence, his spirit, his word, his wisdom, including in the meal of equality, where God reshapes our hungering so it becomes a hunger for the realm of God to be here now, the meal where everyone eats and drinks at the same table and the meal is equally shared. The realm of God. The economy of God.

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*Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace*



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