

'Blessed are the poor...here in Henleaze'

Sermon for 17th Feb 2019 by Mark Pilgrim

We can talk the talk. We can talk the walk. But can we walk the talk?

That's the challenge I feel the gospel is laying down this morning.

Let's unpack what I have just said.

It's easy to **talk** about Christian faith. It's easy to explore and air our views on all sorts of aspects of Christian theology and doctrine. It's easy to talk about the 'head' stuff – the theory. That's the way to 'talk the talk'.

We can also describe relatively easily in words what to do to make the world a better place, a world in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. We simply have to talk about making friends or resolving conflicts to 'talk the walk'.

But putting what we say Christian faith is into practice – 'walking the talk': sometimes that's a real challenge...

...and it's a challenge that can hit us really hard as we engage with today's Gospel reading.

Luke records Jesus as saying: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' and 'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation'. As you may already realise, Luke's Beatitudes are not 'spiritualised' as Matthew's more numerous Beatitudes are. Luke is down to earth and pragmatic. Matthew has 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God'. Luke's first Beatitude is simply 'Blessed are you who are poor, for your is the kingdom of God'. It is concerned not with spiritual but with material things – actual poverty rather than poverty of spirit. And Luke's Beatitudes assume that both poor and rich people are amongst Jesus' current audience. Jesus speaks of 'you who are' not using Matthew's impersonal 'those who'.

So: what are we going to do about this on 24th February 2019 here in prosperous Henleaze?

The Beatitudes in both Luke and Matthew's Gospels lead into major sections of Jesus' teaching his followers about what is ethical and righteous behaviour in the sight of God. That teaching is, of course, 'love your neighbour as yourself' and the Golden Rule 'Do to others as you would have them do to you'.

When we become aware of inequality or injustice or a disparity in living conditions between ourselves and other people, what are we to do?

How are we to **walk** the talk?

At this point it's important to celebrate (before we beat ourselves up about it) that a great deal of walking the talk is already going on. Both in private and in public people across our neighbourhood and people connected to St Peter's and other Christian communities are doing things to make a difference, to bring God's love to situations large and small wherever they are.

As I've reported on other occasions, Lee Rayfield, the Bishop of Swindon, quickly recognised this when he spent a Sunday here some years ago. After chatting with people over coffee and lunch he concluded: 'the Secret Service is alive and well and operating effectively through St Peter's, Henleaze'.

Walking the talk continues to be done not only on an individual basis but on a communal one too. St Peter's Henleaze Hospitality group, for instance, is travelling alongside the Ibrahim family, the Syrian refugee family settling in Henleaze in December, on a daily and sometimes even more frequent basis. It's a delight to report that the children are now in school and their parents can now think about going to English

classes and finding work and meeting people in the local and wider community. An update on this will appear, I am reliably informed, in next month's Newslink.

Another thing to take on board is that there are always more opportunities for us to make a difference than we, individually, have time and resource to contribute to positively.

But there is a specific challenge which I feel moved to bring to our attention this morning – and I do so on the basis of what three prompts. The first is an idea that came to me following the brief trip Gabrielle and I took to Amsterdam at the beginning of January. It centred around our observation that, in a city the size and attractiveness of Amsterdam, it was a surprise not to see any evidence of homelessness or rough sleeping.

The second prompt came from a lady called Valerie I met for the first time on Friday. Valerie was looking for Brenda Fearn's funeral a week early. She lives close to Yvonne Tolchard: she was so impressed by Brenda's attention to Yvonne that she felt she wanted to come to Brenda's funeral. At the same time she wanted to talk to me about the very thing that was on my mind following my trip to Amsterdam i.e. how to support homeless people. The third prompt is the funeral address I have already written for Brenda but won't be delivered until next Friday. In it I invite everyone to think of something they might do to care for others in future that would take forward the care which Brenda herself offered so generously.

The specific opportunity I have in mind is ('once again' you might say) the situation of the homeless men on our doorstep. Josh, the seller of the Big Issue outside the Co-op, has been joined by a young man who simply sits outside the newsagent next door to the Co-op, grateful for any donations passers-by will give him. The two don't coincide. Josh works from 7 in the morning to around 3 in the afternoon. The other young man (does anyone know his name?) invites support from after the newsagent closes to around 11pm when the Co-op shuts. Both are homeless and eke out their money to spend the night in B&B's and the cheapest hotels from time to time. One thing neither of them like doing is spending nights in central Bristol – because of the prevalence of drugs and violence in that area.

The idea I wondered about, having done a little bit of research about how, in the Netherlands, support for at risk people was tied to the place they were resident in – and deterred them from drifting into big cities – was this: could we, Josh's local community, somehow band together to support him? If we knew how much money Josh needed to put down a deposit and pay the first month's rent on a flat he, through a mix of earnings and benefits, could then afford, could we do that in a sensitive and concerted way? In my own mind, I imagined Josh selling the Big Issue in front of a 'pounds thermometer' – indicating to all the passers-by how much had to be raised and how successfully the effort was going to raise it. Given Josh's popularity with people on Henleaze Road – and the possibility that, when he has accommodation, he might be able to get a job at the Co-op, I didn't think it would take long for a target of that type to be reached. I haven't shared this thought with anyone else before now – except with Valerie.

I shared it with Valerie because she had independently had a similar idea. Her thought was 'Could the residents of Henleaze not, in some way, support these young men to move through and out of the homelessness they now experienced?' Both of them, as we understand it, have had to leave the accommodation they were in because of the deaths of those they were living with – in Josh's case, his brother and in the other man's case, his mother. It was after Valerie had put her question to me that I shared my idea with her. She helpfully responded that, as far as she was aware, any scheme by which the men themselves appealed for public donations would fall foul of anti-begging legislation. An alternative solution has to be found - which led me, you may be pleased and relieved to hear, to recommend that the best next step was for concerned people in Henleaze to work with the experts in the statutory authorities. This might include Josh's medical support worker – helping him manage his type 1 Diabetes. It would also

include engaging with the Homeless Outreach workers who were instrumental in guiding matters when local Gentleman of the Road, James Brooks, lived here at St Peter's for six months in 2011.

So, the long and the short of the challenge issued by Luke's Gospel this morning is: are some of us at St Peter's in a position to form an action group – similar perhaps to Henleaze Hospitality – to work with Valerie and potentially other interested residents in Henleaze to travel with the two young men currently experiencing homelessness on our doorstep? The Director of Bristol YMCA, who met Josh on the HeartEdge day we had in June when we went for a walkabout through the community, told me that the most valuable thing people like us could do for people in Josh's situation was to accompany them through the statutory and benefits systems. Such accompanying might be, at their invitation, attending benefits meeting with them – understanding what benefits they were entitled to and making sure that they could access them. It might be hum-drum and frustrating stuff: but sensitive accompaniment was the key.

The little bit of research I have done since meeting Valerie last Friday leads me to suggest that the first port of call for such a group would be the St Mungo's Bristol Homeless Outreach Team. I have their telephone number and address to hand at home. What happens thereafter – the way in which local residents like ourselves, Valerie and others could provide accompaniment – is unknown.

But Valerie is going to come to Brenda's funeral on Friday. And she and everyone else there will hear my appeal to do something in Brenda's memory and after Brenda's example. What response shall we give to Valerie's hope that people at this church will, with her and others like her, make a difference to these cases of real poverty in our midst?

Please see me afterwards or contact me later if any of what I have now shared resonates with you. To create a Henleaze Homeless Group to run alongside but to be different to Henleaze Hospitality – and to include non-St Peter's attending members – would be a marvellous thing.