

Sermon by the Revd Canon Bruce Ruddock, Chaplain  
**Third Sunday Before Lent (17.02.2019)**

Anyone who has ever been into the pavilion at Lord's Cricket Ground during a match, at any level of the game, will know that the dress code is strict. For example, I quote from the MCC rules: "*males of 15 years and over must wear a collared shirt at all times*". And then...one may only take jackets off outside the pavilion but they must be put back on when returning inside. I once came a cropper with an official there, when I popped into the loo inside the pavilion, without remembering to put my jacket back on.... and I thought I would turn into a pillar of salt when I was caught using my my mobile phone on the staircase! For both men and women the list of what attire is *unacceptable* is far longer than that which is acceptable, but as someone who likes to dress up smartly on such occasions, I have no objection to the rules whatsoever.

There can be a temptation to see the Christian faith in terms of a list of rules and regulations to which one must sign up in order to belong to the Church. And of course, we have the Creeds and the promises made at Baptism and Confirmation – and indeed ordination -through which we declare publicly that we accept the basic tenants of our faith.

But saying "Yes" to the Ten Commandments, the Catholic Creeds and God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is not the same as signing up to membership of a club. A club demands

adherence to rules (which of course to some extent church membership requires as well) but is a journey, which sometimes involves risk and being in undefined spaces and surprising situations that no membership manual or rule book can prepare us for.

Even the Bible isn't a rule book. It is a far richer and more wonderful document than that and requires us to reflect on and pray through its texts with an open heart.

Having said that, the Gospels show Our Lord being quite clear about what real discipleship means. In the passage from Luke we have just heard, we have his Beatitudes, which have similarities *to* but are distinctly different *from* Matthew's. And unlike in Matthew, these are followed by "*woes*". "*Woe to you who are rich...woe to you who are full now*"... On the face of it, the boundaries seem very clear.

And from our Old Testament reading we heard how the prophet Jeremiah is also quite clear - amidst all the turmoil that was swirling around him – *clear* who was blessed and who was cursed, and that God was their sole refuge. He has generous words for those who trust in the Lord : "*They shall be like a tree planted by water sending out its roots by the stream*". It can be easy to forget that behind so much of Jeremiah's frequent talk of punishment for idolaters, there is a deep sensitivity to God's love for his people

We then heard St Paul earnestly trying to put the Corinthians back on track in terms of the fundamental building block of Christianity: the bodily resurrection of Christ, and that if they cannot accept that, then – frankly – they are no different from the time that they didn't believe.

And so, from both the Old and New Testaments, we have plenty of material that is unambiguous about what marks us out as people who truly believe in God and follow Christ as opposed to those who don't.

But we cannot always simply extract biblical passages and use them as simplistic templates for life. And today's Gospel passage is an example of this: and when reflected on, again with an open heart, ... it can truly enrich our own discipleship today.

Luke's Beatitudes form part of what is called "The Sermon on the Plain" because unlike the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, when Jesus goes up the mountain to teach them, in Luke, he has come down from the mountain onto what is described as "a level place" i.e. a plain..

And unlike Matthew who says "*Blessed are they who are the poor in spirit*", Luke has Jesus saying "*Blessed are **you** who are poor*" ... "**They**" ... in Matthew ..... "**You**" in Luke: surely, therefore a different audience, especially as we are told that there was a great crowd and not just the twelve, as in Matthew. And then, of course, as I have already quoted, we have "*Woe to*

*you who are rich....”* and *“Woe to you who are full now”*. What are we to make of that?

Well, for a start, we need to remember that Jesus was not extolling poverty. As in Matthew, the poor (or “the poor in spirit” in his case) are indeed the economically needy, they are weeping and hungry, but they are also therefore those who *know their need of... God*. By contrast, Jesus warns that the wealth of the rich can prevent commitment to him. Many of Luke’s church were wealthy and - more so than in our own time - wealth automatically brought honour, power and status. So, Our Lord is reminding them that they are not condemned because of wealth, but that they need to watch out that their good fortune doesn’t lead to complacency when confronted with the demands of true discipleship.

As we heard, Jeremiah put it another way. *“Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals”* he says. Strong stuff... but he is dealing with the problems of idolatry and being distracted by Gods made by human hands.

As we know, today we are surrounded by plenty of potential idols which, if we are not careful, can have the same effect. I spent Friday at the London Classic Car Show. I am sure that God really wanted me to enjoy it, as with many of the good things in life. But, my goodness, if I was a wealthy man, I could easily plant my heart right there with one of those beautiful machines.

But Jesus' point is that riches and possessions, can lead us to the sort of self-satisfaction which shuts us off from the grace of God, and a feeling of power... that can even lead to the manipulation of people.

And whoever we are, we are called to look out for God's future, his Kingdom, which in many ways inevitably involves a dissatisfaction with inequalities of the present.

So, to finally return to where I started, Christianity doesn't present us with a rule book, although there are plenty of biblically based rules, commandments and creeds and doctrines to sign up to: the foundational one being the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Nor does God present us with an argument to be proved and then ticked off as "done".

He is an intensely passionate God, who, when he comes into relationship with people unites with them in the depths of their souls and makes them incapable of having any other God than Him.