

# True Disciples Grounded in God

KATHLEEN RUSHTON interprets Jesus's teaching on the beatitudes as told in Luke 6:17-49.

The Gospel of Luke is addressed to those living in the Gentile and Greco-Roman world. The story of Jesus is shaped to show them how they are to live and proclaim the Gospel in their cultures. For these people, "the twelve", are like windows into what it means to be authentic disciples. Like them, we need to interpret this discipleship in our own time and place.

## Jesus — Solitude of Earth

For some time, Jesus has been carrying out the programme he announced in the synagogue in Nazareth when he read from the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed "the year of God's favour" (Lk 4:16-19). As his ministry unfolds, Jesus desires and experiences the solitude of Earth and nature. His baptism in the waters of the Jordan and time in the wilderness prepared him for the temptations (Lk 4:1). Before calling his first disciples, he departed for the wilderness (Lk 4:42). When he returned to the waterfront, the crowds "pressing in on" him were so great that he taught from Simon's boat. Later Jesus called Simon and companions on the Lake of Galilee (Lk 5:1-11) and, nearby, Levi the tax collector (Lk 5:27-28).

Before Jesus formally selected the twelve, he "went out to the mountain to pray and he spent the night in prayer to God" (Lk 6:12). The mountain, rich in biblical

symbolism, is where Jesus communicated with God.

Jesus's pattern of praying — intimacy with God in solitude on a mountain — is repeated in the Gospel; Jesus is transfigured in prayer (Lk 9:28) and just before his passion and death he prays with his disciples on the Mount of Olives (Lk 22:39-46). More than in the other Gospels, Jesus is presented as praying in Luke.

## Jesus Calls 12 Apostles

Just as Israel was descended from the 12 sons of Jacob, Luke images the community of the reign of God as resting on 12 chosen individuals (Lk 6:12-16).

They are called apostles — literally, the ones who are sent on mission. Notice the categories of people Luke says are gathered around

Jesus: "He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon" (Lk 6:17). The closest to Jesus are his newly chosen twelve apostles. Next is the wider group of disciples from which they were chosen. And then is the great multitude who have gathered from near and far.



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— 17 February —

RL 6th Sunday Ordinary Time – Luke 6:17; 20-26 and

RCL 6th Sunday After Epiphany – Luke 6:17-26

— 24 February —

RL 7th Sunday Ordinary Time and RCL 7th Sunday After Epiphany – Luke 6:27-38

— 3 March —

RL 8th Sunday Ordinary Time – Luke 6:39-45

## With Those Gathered

After a night of prayer and selecting the twelve, Jesus came down with them and stood with those gathered – not over or above them. The condition of the multitude is described vividly. They came to hear Jesus, those sick to be healed of their diseases and those troubled with unclean spirits to be cured. They “were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them” (Lk 6:18-19).

The crowd took the initiative. They tried to touch Jesus to be healed not from afar but through human contact. Jesus allowed himself to be touched. He communicated a desire to heal and a love that brings about wholeness. In front of this crowd of afflicted and burdened people, Jesus instructed the twelve, those who will serve as the windows through which Luke’s communities will witness authentic discipleship. Jesus’s *deeds* of healing (Lk 6:17-18) are followed by his *words* of teaching, preparing the twelve for mission (Lk 6:20-49).

## "Congratulations" "Unfortunate"

If we set aside our own familiarity with the Beatitudes we will better appreciate the sharpness of Jesus’s sermon. Jesus “looked up at his disciples”, addressing them, calling them “blessed” (Lk 6:20-23) and inviting them to ongoing conversion (Lk 6:24-26). He addressed the disciples directly in the second person laying out the principles for inclusion in the reign of God: –“Yours is”, “You rich”.

Brendan Byrne suggests that “blessed” in this text is better conveyed as “congratulations”. The blessed formula declares a person to be in a “fortunate or advantageous position in view of a coming action of God”. On the other hand “woe” means “unfortunate”. But ideas clash provocatively for both the poor and the rich in the text. It shocks us to congratulate the poor on being poor, the hungry on being hungry, those who weep and those who are reviled for their situation. It seems crazy to assert that the wealthy, the well-fed, those who laugh and those who benefit from good reputation are unfortunate.

So who are those declared “blessed” in particular circumstances of poverty, hunger, pain, sadness and persecution? Jesus began by addressing explicitly “you” (the disciples) who are poor and rich, now (found four times in Lk 6:20-26). Remember “the twelve” are windows of what disciples are to be in Luke’s community, that is, the poor and the rich among them. So far, good news for the poor spirals throughout Luke (Lk 1:52-55; 4:18). God is on the side of the poor and pledged to act on behalf of the poor and marginalised.

The poor are certainly the economically poor. Traditionally, for those waiting for God’s salvation in the fullest sense, economic and social justice are included. Salvation also includes those who have a deep spiritual longing. Their vulnerability, openness and emptiness provide scope for God’s way and action. They are not passive victims.

The words of Jesus and the context need to be held together. Jesus is speaking to the disciples in the countryside, in front of the multitude – many of whom

are vulnerable and afflicted. Their vulnerability gives room for God to act.

## To Go Beyond

“But I say to you that listen”, continues Jesus, taking vulnerability to new limits in a series of imperatives: “Love your enemies ... bless ... do good ... Give to everyone ... Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Do all of this is in the face of “hate”, “curse” and “abuse” (Lk 6:27-38). True disciples are to go beyond, to do more than the golden rule, to be grounded in the covenant attitudes and actions of God. They are to be merciful as God is merciful.

Vulnerability means disciples are to engage in self-scrutiny. Jesus illustrates this humorously with a speck and the log (Lk 6:37-42). The “tree and its fruits” parable encourages commitment to right action (Lk 6:43-45). The “two foundations” parable invites reflection on the sermon. Its teachings advise disciples to form strong foundations to withstand the coming flood of opposition (Lk 6:46-49).

## Window for Today

We can reflect on the sermon on the plain and its context for authentic discipleship for our time. Like Jesus, we can seek solitude and prayer in nature around us. And we can reflect on how “the twelve” provide a window for God’s mission of healing the Earth and the poor today. 🏠

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