

In case you hadn't noticed when you went to buy some very expensive gas, or when you heard the news of a Canadian truck blockade or saw photos of Russian jets practicing very close to the Ukraine border....we live in a scary world.

Each day we are asked to cope with unexplored territory with nerves frayed and only distant memories of calm and order. In case you hadn't noticed, my friends, we aren't in Kansas anymore.

Gather all your emotions: your fears and aggravations, your worries and pressures, your grief and anger as you listen to this word from the one who is called Savior, and ponder whether this is, in any way, good news.

For today we stand on a plain, on the level place where throughout history Israel has met its enemies and oppressors. The level place is where armies clashed, blood was spilled and hopes and dreams and freedom died. We stand with Jesus on the plain where the ground is soaked with blood, suffering, misery, mourning, and death.

We stand on this level place and listen to Jesus teach. This is where the poor, the hungry and the grieving live their days; where they are pushed around, without defense against the more powerful who claim all the privilege in their path.

Are we prepared to hear this word?

Jesus spent the night on the mountain, preparing with prayer. Then he chose his small band of disciples, those who would also take his message into the world.... the world that waited to greet them on the level place.

Jesus greets US here as well, with words rough with reality. Blessed are the poor, he says. These are my people. They are in my kingdom already. This is the kingdom that I bring to you.

Honestly, these blessings are probably not for us. We may not be wealthy but we know we are better off than the poor ones – folks who will never have enough, for whom opportunity is always just out of reach –

The poor who appear cursed: by genetics, or luck or location or gender or race. The ones always at the bottom. Jesus speaks directly to them saying, ‘in spite of all evidence to the contrary, YOU are blessed, and the kingdom is yours.’

I find it unsettling. We’ve always thought that whatever blessings we have are a result of our hard work or good character, they are public proof of our worthiness, and yet here Jesus says, ‘blessed are the poor, the hungry, the grieving’. Just possibly, Jesus is the only one in history who has ever thought that.

And just in case we missed it, Jesus adds, Woe to the wealthy, to the satisfied, to those who laugh in the face of others’ sorrow. Where you were once filled with good things, you will experience emptiness and need.

Somehow, we who follow this one called Jesus and share his message with others, need to make sense of what he is teaching. Jesus is not talking about a simple tweak to the existing system but a whole new world....a new kingdom coming into being in Jesus and through Jesus. He is challenging

our most basic assumptions, to trust in him more than any other power or person or public opinion.

I think that a legitimate question therefore needs to be, Why? Why trust in this Jesus? What is he offering – what hope? What vision? What future is in store for us in this kingdom where the poor are blessed and the wealthy are cautious?

It's tucked in there in the story, and easily overlooked. Jesus came down from the mountain, strengthened with a night of prayer, and he healed them of their diseases and freed them from the demons who held them prisoner.

Not because he was a sorcerer, nor because he hypnotized them into thinking they were better. Not because he painted a rosy picture of a better world to come. But because power came from him – the power of the Creator, the power to change the here and now, to restore the broken places and give life back to those who were captive to death.

He emptied them of the diseases which brought them death and filled them with health and life. He cast out the powers that kept them prisoner and gave them freedom. He drained away all that was killing them and restored them to new life.

His is a story not just of restoration and renewal but a story of death and resurrection. Not just for some, but for all. Not for a time in the rosy future, but for now – while they are poor and grieving and hungry....while we are poor, grieving and hungry.

And if it means that the wealthy need to be emptied of all that gives the comfort today in order to grasp ahold of the power of life that binds all of humanity together, then so be it. If those who rely on the shiny things of this world to give them worth need to lose it all in order to see the blessing of life at its core, then so be it.

When that happens, Jesus will be there, standing firm, clinging to us more strongly than we cling to our worldly possessions.

This is all very difficult to believe. The poor have no evidence and the wealthy are convinced they have no need. In the bright light of our daily lives it is incomprehensible, unimaginable.

And when you are standing in your level place, waiting for a cancer treatment, or holding the hand of a dying loved one, or facing financial ruin, or grieving over a child gone astray.... when we are stripped of all this world offers as comfort, Jesus asks us to believe that we are already and have always been a blessed one in his heart and in his kingdom.

A kingdom of healing and restoration. A kingdom of cross and resurrection.

Lord I believe, help my unbelief.