



5th Sunday in Ordinary Time: February 14, 2010

Theme: Trust in God leads to blessings, Trust in humans alone leads to woe.

Reading I: Jeremiah 17: 5-8 Author: Baruch the scribe partly Date: ~ 600 BCE

Background: There is a woe pronounced upon those who trust in human beings and a beatitude upon those who trust in YHWH. The woe is the shrub in the desert and the beatitude is the tree by the waterside.

Theme: Cursed is the one who seeks his strength in the flesh.

Question: Do you believe you will be blessed if you have complete trust in God?

Reading II: 1 Corinthians: 15: 12, 16-20, Author: Paul Date: ~ 55 AD

Background: This is a continuation of Paul from last weeks verse, ending at 11. Christ’s resurrection is our hope that determines all other resurrections. It is not just that we hope to go to heaven when we die or that we believe that the souls of all persons are intrinsically immortal. It is rather that God has forgiven us in Christ, and nothing, not even death itself, can deprive us of that new life.

Theme: God’s resurrection of Christ secures ours.

Question: ?What is the thread to tie this reading to the Gospel and 1st reading?

Gospel: Luke :6:17, 20-26 Author – Luke, Date: ~ 80-85 AD

Background: In Matthew the Sermon has nine beatitudes and is delivered on a mount (the new Sinai) and paints “poor” with “in spirit”. The poor and the hungry are those who know that they have nothing in and of themselves to entitle them to a right relationship with God. They know themselves to be the have-nots. Luke’s Great Sermon has four Beatitudes and four Woes, delivered “on a level place.” The sermon is addressed, not to the crowds, but to the disciples in the presence of the crowds. The ethics of the Great Sermon are not meant for the world in general but for those who have already decided to follow Christ. They presuppose grace. This is not a general law but the demands upon those who have already been enabled by grace to fulfill them. Hence Jesus’ lack of concern for whether his disciples will be able to fulfill such a demanding ethic. Only insofar as persons are “in Christ” (to use the Pauline equivalent of the synoptic “Follow me”) will they reproduce this kind of life in their own lives. Matthew is correct when he glosses “poor” with “in spirit,” and “hungry” with “for righteousness,” for ultimately it is a question of human beings’ relationship with God.

Beatitude	Poor	Hungry	Weeping	Hated
Woe	Rich	Full	Laughing	Spoken well of

Theme: Blessed are those who trust in God.

Question: How would you live your life differently if you feared the “woe” in this Sermon? Which Sermon on the Mount – Luke or Matthew - do you favor and why?

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Reading I: [Jer 17:5-8](#)

Thus says the LORD:

Cursed is the one who trusts in human beings,
who seeks his strength in flesh,
whose heart turns away from the LORD.

He is like a barren bush in the desert
that enjoys no change of season,
but stands in a lava waste,
a salt and empty earth.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,
whose hope is the LORD.

He is like a tree planted beside the waters
that stretches out its roots to the stream:
it fears not the heat when it comes;
its leaves stay green;
in the year of drought it shows no distress,
but still bears fruit.

Reading II: [1 Cor 15:12, 16-20](#)

Brothers and sisters:

If Christ is preached as raised from the dead,
how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead?
If the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised,
and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain;
you are still in your sins.

Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.
If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,
we are the most pitiable people of all.

But now Christ has been raised from the dead,
the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Gospel: [Lk 6:17, 20-26](#)

Jesus came down with the twelve
and stood on a stretch of level ground
with a great crowd of his disciples
and a large number of the people
from all Judea and Jerusalem
and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon.

And raising his eyes toward his disciples he said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for the kingdom of God is yours.

Blessed are you who are now hungry,
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who are now weeping,
for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you,
and when they exclude and insult you,
and denounce your name as evil
on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice and leap for joy on that day!

Behold, your reward will be great in heaven.

For their ancestors treated the prophets in the same way.

But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are filled now,
for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will grieve and weep.

Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for their ancestors treated the false
prophets in this way.

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Cursed is anyone who trusts in human beings."

Perhaps Jeremiah was having one of his many bad days when he came up with that bit of wisdom. The very idea. We are cursed if we trust humans.

When we hear such outrageous statements in our scripture, if we're not dozing off, we must somehow flick a little switch in our consciousness that allows us to think, "This has to be nonsense." Then we don't have to worry about making sense out of it in our daily lives. No sane human would think or talk the way Jeremiah does.

But that is what should give us pause. Maybe our sane, human way of thinking is not God's way. What if God's ways are utterly unlike our ways?

We try to enlist God in the respectable ranks of human nature, the best, highest, and brightest of us. But God is not us. God is utterly beyond our words and concepts, infinitely more vast than our deepest desires and resistant to our meager common sense.

Moreover, if we are to judge by Luke's account of the Sermon on the Mount, even Jesus, who is God with us, has a view of human affairs thoroughly at odds with our own. If we have to tune out Jeremiah's mistrust of humankind, imagine the skills of repression we must employ to ignore Christ's rejection of our every human impulse.

The benighted Nietzsche was clever enough to see the terrible truth in the Sermon on the Mount. What Jesus proposes is a bald reversal of human nature. Nietzsche knew that every last one of us wants wealth abounding and a full stomach. We dread suffering. Being hated, and insulted by others is among our greatest nightmares.

But Jesus deemed such conditions blessed. We are to rejoice if we are poor and hungry. We are to take delight in our tears and accept gladly our rejection by the powers of the age. This outright rejection of natural wisdom and desire so infuriated Nietzsche that he raged at those who might dare to follow Christ:

Not contentment, more power; not peace at any price, but war; not virtue, but efficiency. The weak and the botched shall perish: first principle of our humanity. And they ought even to be helped to perish. What is more harmful than any vice?—Practical sympathy with all the botched and the weak—Christianity.

Nietzsche realized that there is something in Christianity dreadfully at odds with our natural impulse. He would never settle for some watered-down feel-good Jesus who pals along with us in our strutting.

Unfortunately, Christians have done just that. Rather than rejecting outright Christ's teachings, we soften and suffocate them with the pillows of our more realistic wisdom. As the great English writer and theologian Dorothy Sayers observed, we have snared the lion of Judah, trimmed his claws, and turned him into a domesticated kitten. But if we allow the ways and words of Jesus to have their full force and vitality, we will realize that there is a higher wisdom that confounds all our categories. It is inescapable. If we are to accept Christ, there is something, someone, wholly other than our nature and inclination. The God incarnate in Jesus, the eternal Word made flesh, points to a reality that can never be reduced to human dimension.

Jeremiah, whether we like it or not, in some profound sense was right. We cannot put our trust in humanity. That, weirdly enough, is the devastating program of Nietzsche. He would have us obey only the pulse of our nature, our will to power. This not only denies the authority of God over us; it denies the claim that any other could make upon our wills. It is my survival against yours.

For Christians, our strength, our hope, is not in our flesh, not bound to the cycles of earth. St. Paul, though less contentious than Jeremiah, says as much. "If the dead are not raised, if Christ was not raised, our faith is worthless." And for Paul, the new life of resurrection was only one indication of the unsearchable and incomprehensible ways of God.

While Christ is the entry of God into our human nature, and so transforms all nature and earth itself, his very being is a message that there is more than our humanity, more than all the orderings of the cosmos.

If there is no supernatural order, the Sermon on the Mount makes no sense. But neither do our liturgies, their holy acts and words. When we come together in worship, we do not merely celebrate and honor our frail fellowship and stories. Nor do we adore the mutations of the natural world. What we do is make present to ourselves the mighty work of God, who is the "mystery tremendous and fascinating."

It is not our task as Christians to conform the Christ of God to our needs and expectations. Our task is to conform our lives to him.

Rich and Poor

Mae West observed: “I’ve been poor, and I’ve been rich. Believe me, rich is better.” What is “blessed” about being poor? Why would Jesus say this? What poor person would believe it? At the very beginning of this reflection, it is important to remember that the word “poor” in biblical culture describes a social reality rather than an economic one.

In this cultural context, the labels “rich” and “poor” take on a meaning quite different than in our culture. In antiquity a person became rich because that individual had power to take wealth from those who were weaker and unable to defend themselves. While in the modern Western world wealth itself bestows power, in the ancient Mediterranean world power was the means for acquiring wealth.

By the same token, a poor person in the ancient world was powerless, that is, unable to defend inherited status and wealth. Notice the kinds of people with which the word “poor” is most often associated. As a rule, we read in the Bible about “the poor, the orphans, and the widows.” What these categories share in common is a certain deficiency in social relationships and consequent powerlessness.

The orphan has no adults to protect its interests. The widow, even if she possesses millions of denarii but has no son, is regularly described (even to this day in that part of the world) as “a poor widow.” Economic considerations enter the picture only incidentally and then only for the wealthy.

The culturally more appropriate translation of “rich” and “poor” in the Bible, therefore, would be “greedy” and “socially unfortunate.”

What is “blessed” about being socially unfortunate (poor, hungry, and weeping)? A “beatitude” proposes a cultural value, belief, or behavior pattern that is truly honorable. In Mediterranean society, whose core value is honor, everyone wants to know the honorable thing to do. Obviously, being poor, defrauded of one’s wealth, persecuted, insulted, and the like are not honorable experiences. Such people would be judged as shamed.

In the Beatitudes, however, Jesus promises a reward from God for those who suffer these shameful experiences. The vast majority of people in the ancient world were poor. This condition was brought about by the greedy wicked folk, not by an economy gone awry, laziness, or bad luck. God is the ultimate arbiter of true honor, and the honor God bestows is unsurpassable. When God honors the socially unfortunate, everyone will know their true status.

Jesus’ Beatitudes therefore were primarily words of consolation to people who desperately needed to hear this good news. They also pointed to moral qualities that God-fearing folk should strive to achieve: to know one’s place and keep it (poor); to protest social injustice (hungry and weeping, which are ritualized elements of protest activities). People who behave in such honor-deserving ways will indeed be honored by God, which is the only honor that counts. Who can argue with that

Happy are you who are poor. Alas for you who are rich.

Only Christians have a true sense of values; their joys and sorrows are not the same as other people's. The sight of a wounded boxer wearing a victor's crown would make someone ignorant of the games think only of the boxer's wounds and how painful they must be. Such a person would know nothing of the happiness the crown gives.

And it is the same when people see the things we suffer without knowing why we do so. It naturally seems to them to be suffering pure and simple. They see us struggling and facing danger, but beyond their vision are the rewards, the crowns of victory— we hope to gain through the contest!

When Paul said, *We possess nothing, and yet we have everything*, what did he mean by “everything”? Wealth of both the earthly and the spiritual order. Did he not possess every earthly gift when whole cities received him as an angel, when people were ready to pluck out their eyes for him, or bare their necks to the sword?

But if you would think of spiritual blessings, you will see that it was in these above all that he was rich. The King of the universe and Lord of angels loved him so much that he shared his secrets with him.

Did he not surpass all others in wealth then? Did he not possess all things? Had it been otherwise, demons would not have been subject to him, nor sickness and suffering put to flight by his presence.

We too, then, when we suffer anything for Christ's sake, should do so not only with courage, but even with joy.

If we have to go hungry, let us be glad as if we were at a banquet.

If we are insulted, let us be elated as though we had been showered with praises.

If we lose all we possess, let us consider ourselves the gainers.

If we provide for the poor, let us regard ourselves as the recipients.

Anyone who does not give in this way will find it difficult to give at all.

So when you wish to distribute alms, do not think only of what you are giving away; think rather of what you are gaining, for your gain will exceed your loss.

And not only in the matter of almsgiving, but also with every virtue you practice: do not think of the painful effort involved, but of the sweetness of the reward; and above all remember that your struggles are for the sake of our Lord Jesus.

Then you will easily rise above them, and live out your whole lifetime in happiness; for nothing brings more happiness than a good conscience

John Chrysostom (c.347-407) was born at Antioch and studied under Diodore of Tarsus, the leader of the Antiochene school of theology. After a period of great austerity as a hermit, he returned to Antioch where he was ordained deacon in 381 and priest in 386.

From 386 to 397 it was his duty to preach in the principal church of the city, and his best homilies, which earned him the title “Chrysostomos” or “the golden-mouthed,” were preached at this time. In 397 Chrysostom became patriarch of Constantinople, where his efforts to reform the court, clergy, and people led to his exile in 404 and finally to his death from the hardships imposed on him.

Chrysostom stressed the divinity of Christ against the Arians and his full humanity against the Apollinarians, but he had no speculative bent. He was above all a pastor of souls, and was one of the most attractive personalities of the early Church.