

“Blessings and Curses...”

First Reading: Jeremiah 17:5-10

These verses compose a poem that is part of a larger collection of wisdom sayings that contrast two ways of life. Life with God brings blessing; the power and vitality of God is active in our life. Life without God brings a curse, the power of death.

⁵Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

⁶They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

⁸They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

⁹The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?

¹⁰ | the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

Psalm: Psalm 1

They are like trees planted by streams of water. (Ps. 1:3)

¹Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel | of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats | of the scornful!

²**Their delight is in the law | of the Lord,
and they meditate on God’s teaching | day and night. R**

³They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with
leaves that | do not wither;
everything they | do shall prosper.

⁴**It is not so | with the wicked;
they are like chaff which the wind | blows away.**

⁵Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when | judgment comes,

nor the sinner in the council | of the righteous.

**⁶For the Lord knows the way | of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked shall | be destroyed. R**

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

For Paul, the resurrection of Christ is the basis for Christian hope. Because Christ has been raised, those who are in Christ know that they too will be raised to a new life beyond death.

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

Gospel: Luke 6:17-26

After choosing his twelve apostles, Jesus teaches a crowd of followers about the nature and demands of discipleship. He begins his great sermon with surprising statements about who is truly blessed in the eyes of God.

¹⁷[Jesus] came down with [the twelve] 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. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

²¹“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

Land acknowledgement....

Hello – My name is Pastor Patricia Giannelia, and I greet you this day from the Okanagan region of British Columbia, which is the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Syilx people of the Okanagan. My neighbours include the Westbank First Nation to the west, and the Okanagan Indian Band to the east.

I continue to study and learn what it means to respect the land and its people, and how we can seek conciliation and reconciliation in order to heal the traumas of the past and work together for a mutual future for all people.

We observe today the 6th Sunday after the Epiphany. Epiphany is a kind of “accordion” season, as its length varies each year, depending on the date of Ash Wednesday – March 2nd this year. The liturgical colour of this season is green, and similar to the time after Pentecost, this reminds us of the call to “grow” our faith.

[On a light-hearted note, tomorrow is February 14th, known of course as Valentine’s Day in the civic calendar. The origins of St. Valentine are a bit obscure, as there is more than one recorded Valentine in the time of the early church. From the various sources I have read, I have gleaned a picture of an early Christian, a priest, known as Valentine, who was imprisoned for his Christian faith, and the fact that he would marry soldiers, a practice prohibited at the time. The jailer’s daughter befriended him and he would send her notes penned, “from your Valentine”. Sadly, he was eventually executed – of note is that he was executed for his faith, not for romantic love, as might be popularly believed.]

We begin with the reading of the Gospel appointed for today....

After choosing his twelve apostles, Jesus teaches a crowd of followers about the nature and demands of discipleship. He begins his great sermon with surprising statements about who is truly blessed in the eyes of God.

The Holy Gospel according to Luke, the 6th chapter.... (Luke 6:17-26)

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...the good news of Jesus Christ....

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The “good news of Jesus Christ...?”

Pretty strong words coming from Jesus today and, depending on who you were when
you heard them, his words would convey different messages.

Who were those listeners? As we just heard read: *....a great crowd of his disciples and
a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.*

....a great multitude... So, lots of people; no doubt a combination of the educated and
elite - priests, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, always looking for an opportunity to
catch Jesus up, and the average folk following, listening in, hoping for some wisdom
and encouragement in the harshness of their reality of poverty, oppression, illness and
hardship. And, of course, the disciples – part of an “inner circle” of sorts, enjoying their
closeness to Jesus, yet also trying to figure out what it meant to follow this strange man
from Nazareth, perplexed, not quite understanding, but not wanting it to show...

Jesus’ fame and notoriety preceded him...all wanted to see him, hear him, touch him,
have something from him.

¹⁸*They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*

To these, his words no doubt spoke to the hunger of their hearts, the despair of their souls:

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

²¹*“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

But then, his tone changes as he continues - words of caution and teaching, most probably directed at the disciples:

²²*“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.*

How could that be, Jesus – everyone loves you...you have the words of eternal life...look at the crowds,...what do you mean revile, exclude, defame....?

Remember this is the 6th chapter of Luke – it is early days yet...the disciples are too busy basking in his reflected glory to understand what these words might mean for Jesus and for them eventually.

Then, no doubt casting his glance to the edges of the crowd, to the elites, hovering, not wanting to appear interested – at the same time jealous perhaps, and wanting to catch him up, but also wanting some of whatever it is this strange teacher had to offer...Jesus' words ring out further...

²⁴*“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

²⁵*“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*

*“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

²⁶*“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”*

Surely not us, Jesus? We are the important ones...we are the priests, the scribes, the keepers of the law and the traditions...and wealth – we are the ones keeping the economy going...we have the power of life and death over you....how can you mean us...?!

Anger, no doubt, even fury, how dare he, how arrogant...and yet, they also knew that these were not new words, words Jesus is making up...he is true to the tradition – these are words read out year after year in the synagogue, as the Torah scroll is moved from day to day:

From Jeremiah:

*⁹The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?
¹⁰I the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.*

From the Psalm:

*¹Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel [|] of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats [|] of the scornful!
²Their delight is in the law [|] of the Lord,
and they meditate on God's teaching [|] day and night. R
³They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with
leaves that [|] do not wither;
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⁴It is not so [|] with the wicked;
they are like chaff which the wind [|] blows away.
⁵Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when [|] judgment comes,
nor the sinner in the council [|] of the righteous.
⁶For the Lord knows the way [|] of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked shall [|] be destroyed. R*

For us, listening with the long lens of the “story after the story”, we hear echoes of Mary’s song when rejoicing with Elizabeth her cousin over the child she is carrying, the child to be called “Jesus” – “Yeshua” - “the one who saves”:

*⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*

*and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

Oh, how those words must have stirred the hearts of Jesus' listeners...

Beleaguered and exhausted, where are we with these texts today? In the midst of the chaos of our day-to-day reality here in Canada, our nation at a veritable stand still because of the actions of a few have harnessed a deep anger, frustration and fear, where are we today? Where are we in the midst of the turmoil of our world – armed forces ramping up on the border of Ukraine, the façade of the Olympics holding them fragily at bay, or Afghanistan or Haiti or any number of other places collapsing into chaos, desperation and despair?

Are we in that crowd, desperate to touch the hem of Jesus' garment to find some of that healing and hope we crave? Are we with the disciples, wanting to get it right, but not sure if we have the will to truly follow? Or, are we squirming in our self-righteousness, for we know only too well how good we have it, compared to so many, how decades of structures and systems have created our security at the expense of the inequity of our world today...?

Hard to say...and perhaps that is part of the message – in that at any given time, we can be any one of these...*simul Justus et peccator...at the same time saint and sinner...*as Martin Luther coined it.

As Author Marianne Williamson, often mis-attributed to others, wrote:
"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

So, yes, we are still called to follow the way of blessing – even if so many all around us choose to be self-serving...with catastrophic results...

Privilege brings opportunity – opportunity to be thankful, to be gracious. To share what we have – individually, and systemically. Privilege also carries responsibility - to do what we can to bring about the systemic change needed, so that all are welcome all are blessed, all know they walk humbly with their God...treading not on each other's territory, but gently honouring the God within, and the person without...

As followers of Christ, we have the added gift of baptism - the gift that reminds us of our human frailty, that we are nothing on our own, we are nothing without one another, without Christ. The gift that reassures us that in the midst of all, that we are beloved

and blessed of God... The cross marked on our forehead is a reminder of that gift, and that exhortation that we are called to serve others.

Rooted in baptism, as our biblical trees are rooted in water, we can continue to be seekers of justice and bearers of peace, even when popular voices champion self-interest and self-indulgence. Rooted in baptism we can seek forgiveness, seek new learning, seek new understanding, and work together to build a world that works for everyone.

It is not easy to choose the way of blessing, but the imperative of the call of Jesus invites us and compels us so to do. May we have the courage to respond, and may God give us the strength to prevail.

*⁷Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
⁸They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.*

May we stay rooted, and may we bear fruit of merit. Amen.