

VI Sunday of the Year, Cycle C (16/17 February 2019)

Biblical Texts: Jeremiah 17:5-8; Psalm 1:1-2, 3, 4 and 6; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26

Homily by Rev. James Lease, using *Luke* (LT Johnson, Sacra Pagina), INT, NJBC (relevant sections and then some)

Praised be Jesus Christ – now and for ever!

I have told you about my long hike for food in Poland at World Youth Day 2016. [19th Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2016] They ran out of food at the entry point and so I took two other Harrisburg pilgrims and went on an expedition. One of the difficulties was that we didn't know where the food actually was. We took one route and wound up at a location which had just run out of food. So we changed paths and went elsewhere. We headed to another food distribution point only to turn back. Had we stayed on that wrong path, we would have starved and I'd still be stuck in Poland. On the third try we got the right path, found a food truck and loaded up as many food bags as we could carry. Only by admitting that we were on the wrong path and changing were we able to get to the right place. That theme, the choice between two different ways, runs through the Bible and through our readings today. Your choices matter. Let me talk about Jeremiah, the Psalm, and the Gospel passage.

Jeremiah is the rejected prophet. He pleaded for Judah to reform its ways, to *no longer oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow; to no longer shed innocent blood...or follow after other gods to [their] own harm* [Jeremiah 7:1, 6] He also counseled the kings of Judah to make peace with the Babylonian invaders [Jeremiah 27:11-17]. Jeremiah was rejected, arraigned before the high priests [Jeremiah 26:7-8ff], the words of his prophecy burned [Jeremiah 36:14-23ff] and he himself was imprisoned in a muddy cistern [Jeremiah 38:6]. People plotted against him, though all he tried to do was save Jerusalem by calling the people to repent and reform. It was like preaching sobriety to bootleggers. Jeremiah was ignored and the city was conquered in 587 BC; the temple was burned that the nobility were exiled; that's what happens when you ignore God's Word. In the meantime, people were listening to the false prophets and taking their advice to resist Babylon: a disastrous path.

The theme of true and false prophets runs through the Bible and is important for our day because not everything that looks religious is authentic. It is important to be cautious and discerning. False prophets preach what people want to hear; true prophets preach the Word of God, which means change and conversion which are not popular. So when Jesus speaks of how prophets were treated badly and the false prophets were treated well, he's serious. In our age of fans, rating, likes, shares, going viral and counting how many views a post has, we can learn a lesson from this. The false prophets were the ones that were popular. Don't be deceived by ratings and popularity. They only mean something if the people rating you know what they're talking about. Jeremiah shows the two ways that you can go – trust in human beings, whose short-sightedness ends badly, or trust in God, who wills what is truly good for people and whose ways give life.

The Psalm also talks about two ways that you can go. Psalm One, as the beginning of the Psalms, sets the tone for the whole Book of Psalms, you're supposed to read the book in the light of Psalm One. That Psalm is also about the choice between meditating on the Law of God, the teaching that God gave to Moses at Sinai, or hanging out with bullies, smart alecks, and bad attitudes. Both Jeremiah and the Psalm use the image of a tree: trust in human beings is like being out in a desert – you'll be left all alone to dry up and die. Trust in God is like being planted near water (remember, this is a desert, not PA which has more rain than it knows what to do with); no matter what difficulties come your way, you have a constant source of life to get you through. Your choice of friends and your choice of priorities make all the difference. The message is clear: chose trust in God over popularity and caving to the crowd.

In the Gospel, we have skipped a few scenes to get to today's reading, namely, Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, some healings, and the disciples plucking some grain on a Sabbath. Now we come to what some people call the *Sermon on the Plain* in contrast to Matthew's

Sermon on the Mount. They call it that because the Bible says that Jesus preached it in a level place. This Sermon of Jesus is much shorter than the Sermon on the Mount; we'll be hearing it over the next few weeks and it's worth reading in one sitting. Today we heard the opening Beatitudes; whereas Matthew has nine blessing (they're written on the walls of the church here), Luke has four blessings with four contrasting woes. Luke is big on reversal of fortunes. In Chapter One, Mary sang of how God *has cast down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty.* [Luke 1:52-53] Luke has a vision in which the just are eventually vindicated, and the ways of the wicked vanish, no matter how prosperous and popular they might be now. So if things are rough, it doesn't mean that God doesn't care; it means hang in there, it will all work out.

Jesus emphasizes riches and poverty, acceptance and rejection as opportunities and obstacles for openness to God and God's activity in history. Often, we think of wealth, success, good reputation, and so forth as blessing from God. They certainly can be, and there are some popular trends in some Christian communities nowadays that emphasize these things as signs of God's favor. Jesus has a different perspective – riches symbolize relying on oneself rather than on God and having values which are warped by an attachment to getting ahead. Riches, good reputation, and success for Jesus symbolize a false set of values. Riches, power, and success are not bad in themselves – but just as Jeremiah had spoken 600 year before, they can warp our perspective to the extent that we think that we don't need God in our lives. Likewise, poverty, failure, and being slandered are not good things in themselves, but an opportunity to realize one's own dependence on God, to be opened to letting go of having things our own way, and to being opened to the Kingdom of God which Jesus announces. When Jesus speaks of being insulted on account of the Son of Man, he is the Son of Man, it means being willing to be insulted for being a Christian rather than be a sell-out to coziness and social conformity to a society that doesn't accept him.

Let me explain the woes: riches in Luke isn't just having money, it's also have an attitude about it and lording it over others. Laughter is not just enjoying yourself, it's sneering at people. Being spoken well of is being flattered and fawned upon. So for example, saying [*sniff*] "It smells like broke in here" (which is a way of insulting the economic status of people who don't have AirPods, and if that means nothing to you, let's say it's a way of making fun of people who don't have expensive electronics) is being rich now and laughing now; you might not be laughing when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead and you realize, possibly too late, that people are more important than things and you should have been using your vast resources to make yourself a better person and help others, not belittle your neighbors by bragging to them. Money can't buy citizenship in the kingdom of God; people have worth beyond their finances and despite their finances. Your tax bracket doesn't matter in the Kingdom of God, rather, Jesus point is that *with great wealth comes great responsibility* [cf. Spider-Man].

Luke's beatitudes are not just a prediction of the future change of fortune, they are a challenge to a present change of values. If you are on the wrong path, if you are lording your power over others, attached to comfort, laughing at others, and are a servant of popularity, stop. It doesn't end well. If you're one of the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the laughed at, hang in there; it's worth it. Christ himself is the example of reversal of fortunes: he suffered rejection, mockery and crucifixion and received resurrection and enthronement at God's right hand as Lord of All and Judge of the World. He's the example of fidelity paying off and the example for all of us to follow.

In conclusion, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, and the Psalm challenge us to choice and commitment in the path that we take in life. They challenge us to leave the path of serving image, popularity, and human esteem, of living for the moment, and instead to put our trust in God, follow in his path, and follow it to the end.

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