

Cycle C Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1, 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.

Responsorial Psalm, Ps 1:1-2, 3, 4 and 6

R. (40:5a) Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.

Blessed the man who follows not the counsel of the wicked, nor walks in the way of sinners, nor sits in the company of the insolent, but delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on his law day and night.

R. Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.

He is like a tree planted near running water, that yields its fruit in due season, and whose leaves never fade. Whatever he does, prospers.

R. Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.

Not so the wicked, not so; they are like chaff which the wind drives away. For the LORD watches over the way of the just, but the way of the wicked vanishes.

R. Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.

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.”

The Scriptures today are filled with striking contrasts of blessings and curses. They are written in the Wisdom tradition to encourage us to choose the way that guarantees true joy and eternal life. They tell us that God loves us so much that He fills us with blessings when we empty ourselves and trust in Him.

An actress from the 1930's, Mae West, once said: *"I've been poor, and I've been rich. Believe me, rich is better."* I doubt there are many of us here who would argue with her. And, probably not many in that great crowd of Jesus' disciples in today's Gospel would have argued with this statement either, because they most likely were the equivalent of the middle class today. They weren't hurting, they had no need of a cure, they could afford to travel, and they had no hesitation to follow Jesus, anxious to hear Him teach. These were no common people desperate for their next piece of bread.

Compare them to the author of the first reading. Jeremiah suffered terribly for trusting God. You may know his story: Jeremiah was called by God to challenge his own people, especially the leadership, to return to God's way of doing things. Jeremiah was denounced as a traitor and a public enemy! He was tortured, imprisoned, chased out of town and ended up in Egypt. Then a hit squad, sent by his own people, found him there and killed him. No wonder that during Holy Week Jeremiah is compared with Jesus himself. Both Jeremiah and Jesus could have been taunted with: 'He trusted in God. Now let God come and save him.'

So who are blessed and who are cursed? What is the way that guarantees true joy and eternal life?

Leading up to today's Gospel, Jesus spent the night on a mountain in prayer. He then chose the 12 apostles from the group of His disciples, came down from the hills with them, and seeing the crowd, He delivered the extraordinary Sermon on the Plain. Jesus said to His disciples: *Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, and weeping.* They must

have been stunned; this teaching was not expected. Blessed? No, they were cursed as the poor, hungry or weeping like the crowd of sick and poor nearby.

I am reminded of a story a fellow parishioner, Bob Perfetti, told me about his experience in Haiti. He was busy at the clinic in Hinche making up bags with toothbrush and paste when someone convinced him to visit a church in the remote town of Basam Zim.

There he found the rectory with a pitiful garden with no fence to keep out the animals, no running water and the cobwebs in the kitchen told him that no one had eaten there for months. It is hard to imagine these people as being blessed. The very values that we hold so dear, wealth, security, health, 'that rich is better,' everything that we strive so hard to achieve for ourselves and our children, Jesus says can be hindrances when it comes to the Kingdom of God. How can this be?

The heart of the teaching is found in the Gospel's Beatitudes and the woes. Jesus knew that the poor had already learned to be dependent and how difficult, if not impossible, it is for us to have any sense of dependence on God when we feel rich, consoled, filled and popular. But, it is not the poverty, starvation or sorrow that determines our reward, we can't earn it even by suffering. And, our riches could become the only reward we get. There is a better way.

It is through emptying ourselves that we make room for God and live a life of love prompted by the Holy Spirit. We are blessed when we don't cram ourselves full. We do it as parents sacrificing for our children. We do it as spouses when we keep our marriage sacred. We do it when we empty ourselves before Holy Communion. We do it when we experience wretched poverty in Haiti and return home blessed. When we walk humbly, take care of the poor and the aliens, and are totally dependent upon God, then true joy and peace will come. On the other hand, when we get prosperous, fat, self-seeking, independent, and disregard the marginalized, then trouble comes.

So who are blessed and who are cursed?

There is a choice, according to Jeremiah: to seek true joy through our own human resources, or seek it in God. Trusting in ourselves ends in spiritual desert. Trusting in God secures salvation. A person who trusts in himself first, wraps himself in a false security of health, wealth and worldly wisdom. But a disciple of God, like Jeremiah, though he may appear to be a fool to some, he is ultimately blessed by God. And, never forget how Jesus trusted in the will of the Father that turned the curse of death on a cross into the blessing of resurrection and eternal life.

We have come to the crux of the matter. As the 2nd reading says, *“if Christ has not been raised, then our faith is worthless...But, now Christ has been raised from the dead.”* Through our Baptism and faith we don’t merely believe that sometime we are going to die to sin and be raised to a new and transformed life, we actually experience death and resurrection over and over in our lives. Christ is alive in us and takes us where we don’t expect...in fact sometimes where we don’t want to go...in suffering, hunger and grief. He demands a great deal from us, but when we empty ourselves and trust, miracles happen. He calls us to empty ourselves and live for others, not for ourselves. He calls us to give up our cozy lives and go to places like Haiti. He calls, we empty and then He fills us with His blessings. This is radical. This is our Christian faith. A faith that requires strength....a strength that can only come from heaven.

So who are blessed and who are cursed?

St. Paul answers this way, *“We possess nothing, and yet we have everything.”* 2 Cor 6:10 God loves us so much that He fills us with blessings when we empty ourselves and trust in Him. “I’ve been full and I’ve been empty. Believe me, empty is better.”