

Readings for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

16th February 2025

First Reading: Jeremiah 17:5-10

Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They 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.

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They 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.

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

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We 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. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

Gospel: St Luke 6:17-26

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

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

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

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

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice 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.

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

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.

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

A Reflection for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

A few weeks ago, I said that I struggle to make sense of many of the things that are going on in the world now. I don't understand why some world leaders are behaving as they do and, in particular, why so many people support them. In the intervening weeks, the situation certainly hasn't got any better; indeed, the calamities being meted out on innocent people across the world only seem to get worse. So I am inclined to agree with Jeremiah in today's reading where he says: 'The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse, who can understand it?'

Last week, we heard readings that all concerned the call to follow Jesus, and I asked what is our response and what does following Jesus mean for us? As I said then, the answer is different for each one of us, but one thing I think that is common for us all is the requirement to trust God even, or perhaps especially, when things look bleak.

For the past couple of hundred years or so, we have lived in an age that values 'proof', especially 'scientific proof', and gives value to what is measurable – it is seen as trustworthy. However, as I used to point out to the young people I taught, 'scientific proof' is a misnomer; while science can disprove things quite easily, proving that something will hold true in every circumstance, conceivable and unconceivable, is quite another matter. Scientists deal in probability and develop theories and models that best fit the available evidence – that is not the same as proof. And the other difficulty with this approach is that some things are not measurable or quantifiable in a scientific way, but this does mean that we cannot observe them, and they still help us to experience reality.

A simple example is beauty. We can all think of things we regard as beautiful, but beauty is not measurable in any meaningful way. That doesn't make it any less real or less true for us. And faith in God is like that too. We can't measure it, we can't set out to prove it in any scientific way, but that does not make faith, or the God in whom we have faith, any less real. The writer Merryn Glover, reflecting on the work of Nan Shepherd, said 'However much the material world may be described by science, it can never be reduced to it, ...there is always more to the world ... than meets the eye.' There are things beyond what we can measure and rationalise in this world which, unlike much of what is going on around us, are, nevertheless, trustworthy, and especially trust in God.

In the time in which we now find ourselves, to trust in anything seems to be a bit counter cultural; indeed, it seems that even the idea of scientific proof being the gold standard is passé. According to many in our society, we are our own experts, we question everything and we often don't trust those who actually have expertise, considering them to have some hidden agenda to push. What we disagree with is labelled as 'fake news', truth is portrayed as lies and lies are portrayed as truth. Anyone can disseminate their opinion as 'fact'.

And so, I return to Jeremiah: the heart is indeed perverse beyond understanding. The world seems perverse beyond understanding, and perhaps was always thus. But Jeremiah also says: 'Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.' Even at their very best, human efforts are inadequate and the solution is to reach out to God.

All our readings today remind us of our basic need for God. The people Jeremiah addressed had lost their way and so he called them back to God reminding them that trust in God brings blessings. Like the trees of creation, those

who trust God will be blessed in ways that counter fear and anxiety and bear fruit. In the light of the New Testament, one way to understand bearing fruit is, as we heard last week, to follow Jesus' call in our lives, to play our part in bringing in God's kingdom.

Paul, in the passage from first Corinthians, reminds that, at the centre of the faith we proclaim and share is the resurrection of Jesus. This event is the cornerstone of God's plan for the redemption of the whole of creation, of the final realisation of God's kingdom on earth. But resurrection is beyond our human comprehension, it's not something we can 'prove' in any generally accepted way, and so it requires trust in God, it requires faith.

And then, in our Gospel reading we have the 'Sermon on the Plain', Luke's equivalent of Matthew's 'Sermon on the Mount'. As well as the blessings for those who follow God's way, Luke includes corresponding woes for those who don't. Are these statements descriptive, affirming that those who suffer in life now will be exalted in God's coming kingdom? Or are they prescriptive, telling Jesus followers that they should make themselves poor and hungry, sacrificing all they have and weeping over events in the world? I think, perhaps, they are both. And, just as following Jesus' call in our lives means something different for each of us, perhaps they should raise different questions for us: how do these statements resonate with my experience of God? How do they help shape me to become more attuned to God's will in my life and more aligned with God's priority for the poor, the hungry and the suffering?

And we should also take note of what comes just before this well-known list of Blessings and Woes. A crowd of people had come to Jesus, to hear him and to be healed of their diseases and cured of unclean spirits. They would have been a disparate group of people, some curious, some hopeful, some doubtful, some desperate, but they all placed their trust in Jesus, at least in this moment. We are told: 'all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.'

Today, the world is in desperate need of healing and hope. There is the breakdown of trust in people and institutions we believed had our best interests at heart (sadly including the church), there is the misappropriation of the words of Jesus to justify self-serving agendas, then the climate crisis, the deep injustice of the extremes of desperate poverty and unimaginable wealth, and the tragedy and suffering of wars.

As human beings, we are all guilty in part for these things, but as Christians, we also have the remedy: we have been entrusted by God to share the good news of God's love in the world. We are called to trust in God's good purposes, to allow ourselves to be shaped by God, and to use the gifts and resources he has given us to bring God's blessing in the world, to work for healing, to bring hope. That might be in lending a helping hand to a near neighbour in need, campaigning against the injustice suffered by a neighbour in a far-away country, or changing how we do something for the healing of creation. This is the fruit we are called to bear.

'Blessed are those who trust in the Lord... They 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.'