

Sunday 17th February 2019 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		Epiphany 6 – Year C
Jeremiah 17:5-10	Ps 1	1 Cor 15:12-20
		Luke 6:17-26
FOR A TIME LIKE THIS		

“Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said, ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’ ” (Luke 6:20)

INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that we here in this town are facing a crisis. The water shortage is impacting on us all. No-one can walk by the heaps of rubbish and pretend that nothing is wrong. Schools are struggling, with children being sent home because there is no water for the toilets, to wash hands or to cook food. Many homes have been without water for days and days. We need rain; we need compassion from each one of us to help where we can; we need wisdom on the part of leaders to address the crisis.

THE SCRIPTURES

Wisdom. Choosing the right path, deciding what is best. How to live wisely in the midst of our troubled world. The opposite of wisdom is foolishness, choosing the wrong path, a road that leads to destruction. Some of the books of the Old Testament are called “Wisdom Literature” – the book of Proverbs; the Psalms; Job, Ecclesiastes. They present us with choices between right and wrong, finding our way through life in difficult circumstances. They often contrast the wise person as one who follows God’s ways, who trusts in God, and are blessed, with the foolish person, who does not follow God and God’s ways, and are cursed or condemned.

The Bible readings that we have been given for this morning are from this tradition. They contrast the wise and the foolish, the one who trusts in God with the one who does not. And in the Gospel reading, 1

Jesus takes this further, with blessings and woes. Let's lay the foundation for our reflection on the Gospel, by beginning with our readings from Jeremiah and the Psalm.

Jeremiah 17:5-10

The curse: "A curse on anyone who trusts in mortals and leans for support on human kind, while his heart is far from the Lord" (Jer 17:5)

The one whose heart is far from the Lord "will be like a juniper in the steppeland [a shrub in the desert]... He will live among the rocks in the wilderness, in a salt, uninhabited land" (Jer 17:6); "the ungodly... are like the chaff which the wind scatters" (Psalm 1:5).

The blessing: "Blessed is anyone who trusts in the Lord, and rests his confidence on him" (Jer 17:7)... "He will be like a tree planted by the waterside, that sends out its roots along a stream. When the heat comes it has nothing to fear... without care in a year of drought..." (Jer 17:8); "he is like a tree planted beside streams of water: that yields its fruit in due season" (Ps 1:3)

The behaviour of the righteous is totally different from that of the wicked. The righteous are those who walk with the Lord. They trust in God. They put their hope in God. They have a close and ever-deepening relationship with the Lord that embraces their entire life. But for those who do not walk with the Lord, their lives are meaningless and worthless.

The clear message is that those who trust in the Lord will be recognised and rewarded; those who trust will be like trees planted next to a river; in contrast, those who are faithless – those who turn away from the Lord - will end up in desolation, despair and disaster.

Luke 6:17-26

Our Gospel reading - Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) - is the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49). After a

night of prayer on the mountain, Jesus has chosen the first disciples, who he named apostles (6:12-16). Many have gathered around him, to listen to him, and to receive healing. He begins to teach, it seems, along the lines of wisdom literature, Jeremiah, the psalm, with the words “Blessed are you...” and we can imagine the people preparing themselves to listen to a familiar theme and style of teaching. Their faith would be recognised and acknowledged. This was comforting, it was reassuring – because they who were listening were of course the faithful ones, who were seeking the word of God, who were trusting in God. And so they expect to hear words of comfort.

But instead Jesus speaks words that are deeply unsettling and disturbing. He first speaks to those disciples who are poor, the hungry, the grieving, the excluded. You are blessed, Jesus assures them, because the kingdom of God is yours, you who are hungry will be satisfied, you who are mourning will laugh, you who are insulted and hated will have a rich reward in heaven.

Then he speaks to those disciples who are rich, who are well fed, who are happy, who are popular. “Woe to you”.... “Alas for you...” “I am sorry for you!” You have had your time of happiness; you will go hungry; you will mourn and weep. Your popularity is a sham because that is how the false prophets were treated. I am sorry for you!

Imagine a stunned silence! Imagine uncomfortable glances from some. What is he on about? This is not what we came to hear! And from others, the dawning realisation that perhaps things would change. Perhaps there was hope. Perhaps God did see suffering and hopelessness. Perhaps there was a future. Perhaps poverty and hunger and struggle were not to be a sign of God’s curse or condemnation after all. Perhaps wealth and riches, pleasant as they were, were not necessarily a sign of God’s blessing, but of something else. The need for compassion. The call for mercy. The reminder to look to God. To trust not on one’s own strength and ability and achievements, but to trust in God. To delight not in arrogance and power, but in humility.

One commentary suggests that the Gospel of Luke emerged from a community of rich and poor, with strong social divides; that there may even have been different seats, with the wealthy sitting inside and the poor standing outside.

It is the poor who look to the future, to what God will do, and are dissatisfied with the present. The good news in Luke's Gospel is particularly good news for the poor. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor..." (Luke 4:18). "Blessed are you who are poor..."

In contrast, Jesus upsets the apple cart of the rich, the full, the happy, the easily accepted. He disturbs them and unsettles them. They need to face the consequences of their lot: "a self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency which is not merely in grave danger of shutting them off from the grace of God but which also encourages a manipulation of their fellow human beings."

We see this theme throughout the Gospel of Luke. St Luke is consistently suspicious of riches and the challenge he believes they present to would-be disciples. "Sell all you own, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me (18:22).

AND SO...three lettuces from the Deanery garden...

Let us be disturbed...

Jesus takes the traditional "blessings and woes" of the Old Testament and applies them very differently. Uncomfortable! But it is also an invitation, a constant stirring up, a call to look around, to challenge, to question, to unsettle, to disturb and to be disturbed.

All too often, people think that God's blessings are seen in wealth, in comfort, in prosperity. People are told, "Be faithful, and God will pour out riches upon you. Wealth is a sign of God's blessing." We hear this from some of the pop-up churches that have been in the media recently. But Jesus says otherwise. He looks at those who are

struggling, who are powerless, who are without water, without food, who are without opportunities, and he pronounces blessing on them. On you and me. He says that there is a future. That this is not the only reality. That things will turn. These words of Jesus resound in our time as words of change and hope. He challenges the complacency of the rich, those who have all they need, those who are comfortable, those who do not know what it is to be anxious for tomorrow...

Let us be merciful...

These words of blessings and woes, these uncomfortable words, are for us today, here in Makhanda, Grahamstown. To question. To disturb. To be disturbed. To be unsettled. They give us a picture of a new community, formed by the grace of God, where we look beyond ourselves to those around us, brothers and sisters in Christ, people in need. Desperate. And they call us to especially to show mercy. To be changed and transformed. To share. If we have water, and we choose to take a 20 minute shower, knowing that our town is on the brink of no water – is that mercy? If we have food and shelter, if we are happy and content, and we know that others have none, or if we have doors of opportunity open for us, but we see that those doors are closed for others, and we do nothing – is that mercy? So let us do what we can. Let us allow ourselves to be disturbed, shaken, uncomfortable, unsettled, have sleepless nights. Because in this uncertain space of discomfort, God is speaking to us.

Let us be hopeful...

You and I are invited to trust. To believe. To have faith. To know that in our hunger and poverty, in our struggles, God sees and loves and embraces and promises a future, new life, a way forward.

CONCLUSION

Shortly before he died, Moses, the great leader of the people of Israel, presented the nation with a challenge. “See, I have set before you today life ... and death... Choose life” (Deut 30:15, 19).

In the story of Esther, Mordecai, Esther’s uncle, is speaking to his niece Esther. She has become the queen, and is facing difficult and dangerous choices. Mordecai says to her, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

St Paul writes to the Philippians and says to them, “For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ but of suffering for him as well” (Phil 1:29).

This is our time. This is our privilege. Let this be our choice and let this be our calling.

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