

Sunday 16th February 2025
Blessings and woes

Jeremiah 17:5-10
1 Cor 15: 12-20
Luke 6:17-26

I had mixed feelings when I read these passages earlier in the week. Mostly I understood and agreed with the text but then some statements caused me consternation, food for thought and perhaps a few misgivings and a guilty complex which I will explain later.

So let's begin with the reading from Jeremiah. That appears straightforward to me. It seems we are given a choice; either follow and trust God and receive his grace and blessings, or turn away from him and suffer in the wilderness with no peace. No question as far as I am concerned. I chose to trust God many years ago, but this does not make me better more superior or less sinful than anyone else. It is just that I have a relationship with God and he with me.

There is a prayer we say called the prayer for purity. It begins "Almighty God to whom all hearts are open" It seems to echo the words and sentiments of this Jeremiah passage and is a timely reminder that God sees beyond what is visible to others and He judges on the fruits of our offerings.

Let me tell you about St. Jerome, one of the first translators of the bible. Jerome was praying and he wanted to offer something worthwhile to God.

"Lord "he said very generously "I offer you my life".

The voice came back, "It was I who gave you that. Your life is mine already".

"Then Lord I offer you my heart and my love".

"It was I who gave you those too".

Silence!

Then the Lord spoke again" Jerome" he said, "Why don't you give me your sins? Your sins are all your own".

While you ponder on that, I will quickly skim over Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul is guiding these new Christians on how to live and what to believe. It is a very hypothetical passage with a lot of 'ifs'. It boils down to some dispute whether to believe in bodily resurrection. To me there is no problem - I accept and believe this as part of my Christian faith confirmed every time I say the creed.

Now we come to the crux of the message today - the Gospel reading from St Luke. There are four Blessings and four Woes that Jesus tells the crowds and his disciples.

Blessed are you who are poor.

This opening blessing immediately confronts the value systems of Jesus' time and that of today. The poor without material wealth are blessed because they are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of God. In our world, poverty is often seen as a failure, inherited, a misfortune, they don't try, but in the kingdom of God the poor are lifted up and honoured.

What about the poor in spirit, the poor in health? This statement applies to them too, they will be lifted up, and theirs is the kingdom of God.

On the opposite side we have the following - Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your consolation... I do not consider myself wealthy; but I dare say compared to some people of the world there is no doubt that I am rich. I have a home and comforts. I have money in the bank to pay bills and some left for me to take holidays. I am comfortable. Now wealth and riches in themselves are not condemned, but the pursuit of wealth and the reliance on material riches is. You can't take it with you; it is of no use in God's kingdom. Do not let wealth be your master. So, to appease myself I give to charity, I try to be generous, to be honest to be fair. Do I do enough, or could I do more?

2nd Blessing is "Blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled.

This blessing speaks of those who experience physical hunger, but it also has a spiritual dimension; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

And the opposite "Woe to you who are full now for you will grow hungry... This woe or regret speaks to those who are satisfied with their current comforts and pleasures. The physical satisfaction of today is no guarantee of spiritual peace tomorrow.

Well, I often think life is good, I have all I need, and I am satisfied with life. Is that wrong? Perhaps I should be more concerned with what is happening elsewhere and how my fellow brothers and sisters around the world are coping. Am I too complacent? Too insular?

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

Weeping is often associated with sorrow, loss and pain, but here Jesus promises joy. The grief that comes from living in a broken world will be replaced with laughter, a symbol of the joy and peace that will come when God's kingdom is fully realised.

Woe to you who laugh now for you will mourn and weep. Wait a minute, I like to laugh. Laughter is good for the soul isn't it? This woe contrasts with the blessing for those who weep. There is nothing wrong with feeling happy and laughing. What better sound will you hear than that of innocent children laughing? God wants us to be happy, to show our happiness to share our happiness and there is no better way than to laugh together.

But those who laugh at others, whose laughter is scorn, those who live seeking constant enjoyment and pleasure at a cost to others will find that their joy and laughter is fleeting. What seems like happiness now will be replaced by sorrow later.

Phew, we are almost there.

Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you etc.

This blessing speaks of the persecution that Jesus' follower will face.

Rejection and hatred are not easy to bear, but Jesus promises that those who suffer for his name will be rewarded

Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you!

Ooh isn't that a bit controversial? What can he mean?

This final woe is a warning against seeking the approval of others. Popularity in and of itself is not bad but purposely seeking it at the expense of faithfulness to God is... Jesus warns that false prophets of history were often praised by the people even while leading them astray. We need the approval of God alone.

In conclusion I do agree and fully support all the Blessings. The woes otherwise known as sorrows, sadness or regrets I have questioned and interpreted as best as I could. Luke balances the blessings with woes for a purpose. He warns the rich, well fed, and those who are praised by others that their comfort is temporary if they ignore the deeper things of God.

It's a wake-up call. Are we living for worldly success or are we truly seeking God's kingdom? I hope I have made things a little clearer for you. It has certainly made me think. I have come to the decision (whether right or wrong) that I am not perfect but I am not so bad either. There is always room for improvement.

A song comes to mind but I have altered the words slightly so forgive me, but the words have real meaning if I sing this to God

"Somewhere in my life or childhood I must have done something good,
for here you are standing there loving me
whether or not you should."

For God has blessed my life in so many ways.

I just hope you can count your blessings and be reassured of His love, now and always.

Gill Gough
Christ the King and St John's