



Sermon

Blessings and Woes

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

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The ideas Jesus expressed in the gospel were not new. He was restating what was already found in the Jewish Scriptures. We should not be surprised at that - Paul wrote: "All Scripture is God-breathed ..." ¹ When you understand that all scripture has a common inspiration or should we say expiration - breathed out from God, then it is inevitable that there will be common themes and understanding across the library of documents called the Bible.

Jeremiah prophesied that we should trust in God not in ourselves, other people or things of this world. He warns us not to trust in the flesh (that is the natural order of things including your own strength and abilities). Rather we need to trust in God. He urges us to let our confidence rest on God. We need to find our security in God.

This is not intellectual assent; it is trust – that means depending on God, not depending on other things. Where do we find our security? It can be hard when a threat looms to keep our trust in God. But this is a strength we need to learn through this life. It is not the case that we do it perfectly first time. We are subject to fears which are the expressions of distrust and insecurity. As we go on with God, we learn that he is faithful. We can look back on previous times when he was faithful and that helps us believe he will be faithful this next time.

This sort of faith is like a muscle it grows stronger with use. In 2001, I started a new IT consulting business in London along with a colleague. It was financially alright for a few months but then I could see I would not be able to pay him at month end. I was anxious about that as you can imagine. One Wednesday night at home group our curate led us in praying for specific needs we had. As several prayed with me about this financial concern, an image came to my mind of a robed figure (presumably Jesus) taking a very large gold coin out of a pocket and saying, "Would this help?" The curate enthusiastically prayed that provision into my situation. Come the end of the month - somehow - there was enough money to meet all the bills. The next month I started to get anxious again, but prayed about it and all expenses were covered. Again the next month – at which point I realised I didn't need to worry; provision would be there. I relaxed and so it was. Do you see how that picture gave me a little faith and as I exercised it, it grew stronger until I was confident or secure in God's provision in that circumstance?

Jeremiah says gives us a vivid contrasting word picture for the two ways of living. Trusting in the flesh - that is yourself and the natural world results in a stunted way of life like a tree growing in the desert. The Hebrew word translated tree or bush has two possible translations: One is the juniper tree. This is *Juniperus Phoenica* which grows in the Middle East in the deserts. Jeremiah says it is a miserable existence, in this mode of life we don't see goodness or prosperity when it comes. We miss out on it. This is to live in parched desert lands

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16

– in the salt lands where no one dwells and not much grows. What a picture of desolation, loneliness and hardship!

The other translation rather than juniper is 'naked'. "Youngs Literal Translation" says the one who trusts in man is like a naked thing in a desert. What a sense of desolation to be naked in the desert – burnt by day and frozen by night.

And the contrast of course is the tree planted by the water. It sends out its roots by the stream. This tree does not fear that heat, or worry about drought. It always has green leaves and never fails to bear fruit. Troubles may come represented by heat and drought but because it is well rooted and has abundant water it remains fruitful. Such is the picture of the one who trusts God.

In Jesus' teaching he is, if you will, resetting the instructions to his followers. In the creation account, God creates man and woman and immediately tells them what they are to do: multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the animals – Gen 1:28. He tells them what they may do and also what they must not do: eat of any tree except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – Gen 2:16.

God told them how to live and explained that their greatest happiness lay in obedience to the Law. That rule was very quickly broken and the way of submission was replaced by the way of self-indulgence. Through Moses, God gave a religious Law to show them how to live but it was turned into bondage to rules. Now in Jesus' teaching he redirects them to a way of life which brings real blessedness.

It is a reversal of values from the world's idea of what is valuable to the opposite. To put it in Jeremiah's framework, one is based on trust in man and the flesh; the other on trust in God.

Jesus said that we are blessed when we are poor, hungry, weeping, persecuted as Christians.

In Aramaic (the language spoken by Jesus to his followers) the word for poor is *miskeneh* which means povertystricken but can also mean meek, humble or "poor in pride". Those who are humble, who do not rely on wealth, they have access to the Kingdom of God. How else can it be? – since to enter the Kingdom we must humble ourselves, acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves, ask forgiveness and trust Jesus to save us and lead us.

Some of these beatitudes can be seen as spiritual but some are stubbornly uncomfortable. Years ago, I went to a Peter, Paul and Mary concert. I remember Mary Travers saying it was often those people who had the hardest lives - slaves and the poor - who sang and whistled more than the comfortable. When we visit Africa, we are struck by the joy of the people's worship and their exuberance in the face of considerable hardship compared with our lives – yet we do not exhibit so positive an attitude.

In Jesus' words there will be rewards in heaven. For that to make sense we have to believe in the afterlife. While some sneer at such future hope, if it is true that there are eternal joys after the sufferings of this life – it changes the perspective entirely. The Epistle reading says there is an afterlife – it is proved by Jesus' resurrection from the dead and if there is no resurrection then Christianity is nonsense.

Just as Jeremiah likened the one who trusts in self or the flesh to the juniper tree existing in the wilderness, Jesus said that those who trust in various expressions of the flesh will find they are not blessed after all. As he says elsewhere they will they are really spiritually naked.

We need to be careful that our trust is not in wealth, being satisfied and carefree. If everyone speaks well of us, we are probably people-pleasing rather than seeking God's ways.

If this all sounds rather hard to you, can you think to times when you have given up something which seemed very important to you and found that actually there was great joy in a new freedom or maybe in the act of obedience to God? That can bring an amazing joy which is wonderful to experience.

In all of this, Jesus is saying that the world's ways do not line up with God's ways and true blessedness is found in the values of the Kingdom of God. Would you be like the naked juniper tree on a salt pan or the tree by

flowing water with its roots going deep so it need not fear the drought? Dry times come, but the one trusting in God has provision that will not fail.

The Psalm set for today sums all this up – Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now and shall be forever. Amen.