

For Sunday February 17, 2019

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

We light this flame to honour our past.
 We light this flame to endorse our present.
 We light this flame to symbolise our future.

Offetary

Today is a day of compassion...
 May our indifferences give way to awakening.
 May we allow ourselves to feel more keenly
 the hungers and pains of others we encounter.
 And may we come to know deep within
 that our every act of compassion,
 changes things... even if only ourselves.

Young'uns Chat:

Oranges shared among many last week we did a bit of fishing
 and part of that reflection for me was, how often do I share my
 resources

Message:

Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and
 expendable.
 Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and popular.

This week's Gospel in a nutshell. *Boom.*

Some context: As Luke tells the story, Jesus has just
 spent the night alone on a mountainside, praying before
 he chooses his twelve Apostles. As morning dawns, he

and the newly called Twelve descend from the mountain to find a vast crowd waiting for them. The multitudes have come from everywhere, seeking help, and Jesus — in his element, with power literally pouring off of his garments — heals them all. Then, standing “on a level place” with the crowd, he tells his would-be disciples what discipleship actually looks like.

Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and popular.

Yup, that’s the fabulous Good News of the Kin-dom of God. A world turned upside down. An economy of blessing that sounds ludicrous. A reordering of priority and privilege that the Church has said is impossible and has and does find awkward and even offensive for centuries.

We sanitise these readings by saying, he didn’t really mean *poor*, did he? Homeless poor? Dressed-in-rags poor? Slum poor? Or hungry as in, *literally* hungry? Starving for bread? Also, he couldn’t possibly have meant *sad* people as in, people drowning in grief and despair. People who weep aloud in ways respectable folks never do in public.

Wouldn't it be cruel to call them "blessed?"

And surely he wasn’t referring to *literal* expendability.

To those unlikeable, unpopular, unimportant people no one can blame us for avoiding. Obviously, Jesus was exaggerating. Speaking figuratively.

Preachers have sanitised these readings or avoided them through years, preaching such words of woe to their self-absorbed, affluent parishioners who pay their stipend does not bode well.

If you pretentious affluent parishioners want soft cuddles when it comes to woes then look to the gospel according to Matthew, who softens things a bit by writing “poor in spirit,” instead of “poor,” and “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” instead of plain old “hungry,”

However I fear no man, Luke keeps Jesus’s “Sermon on the Plain” raw, terse, and close to the bone. There’s no way around it; as far as Luke’s Jesus is concerned,

God’s favour does *not* rest on the

well-fed,

the well-off,

and the well-liked.

It rests on those who have absolutely nothing to fall back on but God.

No credit line,

no nest egg,

no fan base,

no immunity. *Nothing.*

If you want to know where God’s heart is, Luke insists, look to the world’s most reviled, wretched, starving, grieving, shamed and desperate people.

They are the fortunate ones. They are the blessed ones on whom God's promise of more and better rests.

So. Okay. What am I to do with this reading?

Wallow in guilt?

Romanticise poverty?

Avoid happiness? I don't think so.

The very fact that Jesus prefaces this hard teaching by alleviating suffering in every way possible suggests that he does not valorise misery for its own sake. Pain in and of itself is neither holy nor redemptive in the Christian story, and in fact, Jesus's ministry is *all about* healing, abundance, liberation, and joy.

Also (look carefully), his Sermon on the Plain is not prescriptive. Nowhere in his litany of blessings and woes does Jesus tell his listeners how to behave. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, the sermon “**is not advice at all. It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone.**” and spent time observing the obvious in a Roman pseudo religiously controlled cesspit of political depravity.

So, I ask the question again: What am I — cozy and comfortable as I am in my healthy, happy, First World, middle-class life — to do with this Gospel reading? How shall I reflect on it? Receive it? Sit with it?

Are you in dire need of anything?

I might begin by admitting that Jesus is right. That is to say, I might come clean about the fact that most of the

time, I am *not* desperate for God. I am *not* keenly aware of God's active, daily intervention in my life. I am *not* on my knees with need, ache, sorrow, longing, gratitude, or love. After all, why would I be? I have plenty to eat. I live in a comfortable home. I have both health and health insurance. My children are middle-class, safe. I live into a vibrant social, intellectual, and recreational life. I'm not in dire need of, well, *anything*.

Are you in dire need of anything?

In short, there isn't much in my circumstances that leads me to a sense of urgency about ultimate things. I can go for days without talking to God. I can go days without *thinking* about God. It's very, very easy — embarrassingly easy — for all things deep and divine to become afterthoughts in my life, because God just isn't on my 24/7 radar.

This isn't because I'm callous. It's because — as Jesus puts it so wisely in his searing sermon — I am already “full.” I have already “received my consolation.” I have easy access to laughter, so I don't wonder what lessons honest tears might yield. I am primed by my cozy life to live in the shallows, unaware of the treasures that lie waiting in the depths. Most of the time, it just plain doesn't occur to me that I would be lost — utterly and wholly lost, physically and spiritually — without the grace that sustains me.

I think what Jesus is saying in this Gospel is that I have something to learn about discipleship that my life circumstances will not teach me. Something to grasp about the beauty, glory, and freedom of the Christian

life that I will never grasp until God becomes my everything, my all, my go-to, my starting place, and my ending place.

Something to humbly admit about the limitations of my privilege.

Something to recognise about the radical counter-intuitiveness of God's priorities and promises.

Something to notice about the power of plenty to blind me to my own emptiness.

Something to gain from the humility that says, "Those people I think I'm superior to in every way? They have everything to teach me. Maybe it's time to shut up and pay attention."

Is it comfortable to sit in the "woes" column? **No.**

Might a willingness to do it anyway save my life? **Yes.**

In a beautiful reflection on Jesus's upside down kingdom, Frederick Buechner writes this:

"The world says, 'Mind your own business,' and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.'

The world says, 'Follow the wisest course and be a success,' and Jesus says, 'Follow me and be crucified.'

The world says, 'Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own' — and Jesus says, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'

The world says, 'Law and order,' and Jesus says, 'Love.'

The world says, 'Get, accumulate ' and Jesus says, 'Give, give it all away.'

In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is mad as a meat axe, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little 'loco' too is labouring less under a cross than under a delusion."

This is not prosperity theology. This is not "blessing" as health, wealth, and happiness. This is a teaching so costly, so soul-rattling, so unpalatable, that most of us will do anything to domesticate or ignore it, justify it!

Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Why?

Because you have everything to look forward to.
Because the Kingdom of God is yours.

Because God is the God of those who have nothing,
you are the ones in tune with whom God is.

Lord, help me to hear what this is saying. Help me not to squirm away. Help me somehow to sit with woe, and learn the meaning of blessing.