

**ADDRESS**

17 February 2019

6th Sunday after Epiphany

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Jeremiah 17.5-10	Curses and blessings
Psalms 1	The two ways
1 Corinthians 15.12-20	The Resurrection of the Dead
Luke 6.17-26	Blessings and curses

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In 1934, as America began to climb out of the depression, an almost unknown songwriter composed a new song for the great tenor Jan Peerce. The song was *The Bluebird of Happiness*.

It makes a promise it can never keep: [Sandor Harmati, died 1936]

*You will find greater peace of mind  
Knowing there's a bluebird of happiness.*

But what if you believe there is no bluebird of happiness, just as there may be no Santa Claus, no tooth fairy, no Easter bunny?

A nasty Shirley Temple trapped the bluebird in a bad film she made in 1940, Gracie Fields and Jimmy Durante both recorded the song to cheer their people up during the war, and Jan Peerce revived it in 1945 as the world celebrated the end of the war. It became a song for all seasons:

*Today a smile and tomorrow tears,  
We're never sure what's in store . . .*

The song tells us that happiness is a matter of luck, of fate, but today we have three readings that remind us that true happiness is about our blessings in God, the One we can be sure of, whether we are thinking about national happiness, or lasting personal happiness. The words used in both the Old Testament and the New Testament can be translated *happy, blessed, fortunate* . . . They are about God with us.

And what is the opposite of happiness, we are told? *Woe, misfortune, sadness* . . . These conditions are ultimately about being separated from God.

Our culture confuses pleasure with happiness and tells us we will find happiness in good health, or in positive experiences, like an absorbing TV program or travel, or in people, in family and friends, or in possessions, in our car or our house or in the stuff in our house.

But many psychologists warn that none of these fleeting pleasures will give lasting happiness.

The so-called Institute for Global Happiness in the United States tells us, and I quote:

*It's incredibly important to find sources of happiness in your life that aren't tied to people or stuff. People come and go. Relationships change: people move, people change jobs, people die, or people just lose touch over time.*

*Stuff comes and goes. Your new car eventually breaks down. Your new phone eventually becomes outdated. Your new computer eventually stops working. You lose things. You forget things. You get a short high when you first buy something, and then it quickly fades away.*

This is all pretty negative, but the Bible repeatedly gives us the positives as well as the negatives: its great men and women of faith show us that the only way to find eternal happiness is to be close to God, to bless him and to be blessed by him.

The psalm we sang today, the psalm that is really an introduction to the whole book of psalms, sings about true happiness. It begins with a series of negatives, *happy are those who don't do this or that or the other*, literally, *have not done this or that or the other*. Much of our unhappiness in the present is a result of what we have done in the past, or what we have failed to do.

The second verse moves to the great positive: *happy are those whose delight is in the law of the Lord . . . they are like trees planted by streams of water . . . in all that they do they prosper*. Happiness is living by the Book, living according to God's plan

Today's reading from Jeremiah also moves from the negative to the positive, and it picks up the same metaphor: the Word of God is the water of life, the water of happiness, but Jeremiah uses another word for 'happy', a word which is often translated as 'blessed' or 'fortunate': *blessed are those, happy are those who trust in the Lord . . . they shall be like a tree planted by water*.

These words from Jeremiah inspired the African-American spiritual, *We shall not be moved*, which became a civil rights protest song in America -- and the anthem of the Leicester City football club in England. The original meaning was lost, because God was written out.

Jeremiah tells his people that they are responsible for their own bad fortune or good fortune. Verse 4, the verse before today's reading, begins: *By your own act you shall lose the heritage that I gave you* . So a people whose hearts turn away from the Lord will be cursed, nothing will go right for them, they shall, as it were, live in endless drought. Many families in this country know the desperate reality of drought. It is a powerful metaphor.

But those who trust in Lord are *blessed, happy, fortunate* --you find different words in different English translations, but the Hebrew word is *baw-rak*, which means *to kneel*, to submit your will to the will of God. That is the source of true happiness.

Happy, blessed, fortunate . . . the ideas behind these English words are all linked in today's Gospel reading, from what is generally called the Sermon on the Plain. Some scholars insist that Luke's Sermon on the Plain is another version of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, even though they are reported as being given in different places, and at different times in Jesus' ministry, and to

different audiences and they have some significant differences in content. If Jesus' ministry lasted for three years, no doubt he gave his core messages many times to different crowds which came to hear him, and to his disciples.

Let's look at the context of today's Gospel. Jesus spends several nights on a mountain in prayer. He chooses his 12 apostles from among the disciples, then he comes down to the plain, where they are joined by a crowd of people from all over, Gentiles as well as Jews.

Many had come a long way to see him, no doubt attracted by his reputation as a healer. Tyre and Sidon and Jerusalem are all 70-80 km from the Plain of Ginosar, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, where this event probably took place. A three-day or four-day trip on foot or by donkey.

Jesus begins by healing those who are sick and then teaches them about the topsy-turvy nature of the kingdom of heaven on earth, which he had come to inaugurate. Before people visit another country, it pays to do some research into its laws and customs, to avoid trouble or embarrassment, like a family finding the fancy dish they ordered in a restaurant in Bangkok is grilled rat, or a man finding that the carriage he's jumped into on the Cairo metro is women-only. As I did once.

This passage spells out the joys and woes of the kingdom of heaven. Here the poor and the hungry and those who mourn and those who are excluded on earth are honoured -- they are happy, they are blessed, but those who are rich and well-fed and happy and popular are not.

The words translated as 'happy are you' or 'blessed are you', *mak-ar-ee-os*, and as 'woe to you' or 'cursed are you', or 'alas for you', *ou-ah-ee*, may be simply descriptive, not denunciatory -- Jesus is not saying 'God blesses you' or 'God curses you'. He is saying that those who are happy on this earth, blessed, will be unhappy in the kingdom of heaven, where God is king, and those who are unhappy on this earth, where greed and self-will rule, will be happy, blessed, tasting the kingdom of heaven. They will be the fortunate ones.

Both words, *makarios* and *ouai*, are used a lot in the book of the Revelation, which gives us many images of the kingdom. *Blessed are the dead, who from now on die in the Lord* (Rev. 14.13); but *woe to [those who dwell in] the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath* (Rev. 12.12). The writer of the book of Revelation portrays the history of humankind as a continuing struggle between good and evil, between the embodiments of God and the Devil.

We are less familiar with today's Gospel passage than we are with the Sermon on the Mount, which was given to the disciples, gathered on a mountain-top, not to the crowds who came to be healed and to hear his teachings on the shores of the sea of Galilee.

To the disciples, Jesus speaks of the happiness of spiritual blessings: *blessed are the poor in spirit . . . blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. . .*

To the crowds, Jesus speaks to their earthly concerns –poverty, hunger, and the sorrow of sickness and death. His message is down-to-earth, desperately relevant: *blessed are you who are poor . . . blessed are you who are hungry now . . .* For them there are the joys of heaven to come. *Woe to those who rich and well-fed and laughing now,* for you have all you will ever have. In the kingdom of heaven there is happiness reversal, blessing reversal, because good has overcome evil through the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount looks on the bright side of the heavenly life, and that's why it is so well-known -- it is popular at funerals. Some believers insist that *God is love, God is love,* as if that is all that need be said. But God is also the God of justice, and the God of mercy, and the Bible speaks of God's justice as well as of God's love. We cannot understand either without the other.

The fourth blessing in today's passage is specifically for Jesus' disciples, for us: *Blessed are you when people hate you . . . exclude you, revile you . . . defame you on account of the Son of Man.* We may need this blessing more now than we did, two generations ago, in the 50s and 60s when Christian principles were generally honoured, even when they were not practised.

The passage continues with Jesus' teaching about how the reversal of fortune in the kingdom of heaven can be expressed. It is a call to us to show the love of God to others: *love your enemies. . . bless those who hate you . . . turn the other cheek . . . give to everyone who asks . . . do to others as you would have them do to you . . .* This is a radical reversal of how people naturally behave. This is living in the kingdom while waiting for the kingdom to come.

Many people live by the principle that *greed is good* or maybe by mindlessly following the advice in the song:

*Be like I, hold your head up high,  
Till you find a bluebird of happiness.*

If we do, we will be waiting for ever!

The Bible teaches and demonstrates that true happiness is to be found in bowing our heads before the greatness and love and mercy of God, and in holding on to the certainties: that God is, and God loves, and God redeems. As today's Epistle reminds us, Christ overcame death and, through Him, God saves us from our natural selves and restores us to the state in which we were originally created – in God's own image. This is the ultimate blessing, the ultimate happiness.

*Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. AMEN*