

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Ps 137

1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20

Luke 6:17, 20-26

In our second reading we heard Saint Paul say: “If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are the most unfortunate of all people.” Now, keep in mind that Saint Paul was a man who endured continual opposition, imprisonment, and eventually death for his faith in Christ. So yes, if all that is what he got for being a follower of Christ, and this world is all there is, he would indeed have been a fool.

Martyrdom, celibacy, self-sacrifice—in short, anything that involves the Cross—makes no sense at all if this world is all there is. And this helps explain why these things can seem so strange to many folks today, given how materialistic our culture has become. I’ve found for myself, for instance, that whenever celibacy comes up in conversation with folks, it can drag on for ages if I’m not careful – because it’s just so strange and bizarre to many people these days. So Christianity cannot be comprehended if it is seen only in the lens of this passing world. And this fact helps make sense of the wildly counter-intuitive message of the Beatitudes that we heard in the Gospel, and to which I will now turn.

Saint Luke’s version of the Beatitudes is a little different from that of Saint Matthew. It’s presented as a diptych, with two corresponding sides – namely, four “Happy are you’s” alongside four “Alas for you’s”, or in some translations, “Blessed are you” and “Woe to you.”

And to start with I think we need to admit that, at first glance, the Beatitudes make no sense whatsoever.

Happy you who are poor? “No,” part of us wants to say, “Miserable are the poor!”

Happy you who are hungry? “No, miserable are the hungry!”

Happy are you when people hate you? “That’s just crazy.”

Our conventional way of thinking strives to be rich, to be comfortable, to be satisfied, to laugh, to look good, to be respected – the very things that Jesus says here, “Alas for you...” In this way, the Beatitudes are more-or-less the epitome of the counter-cultural teaching of Christ, which reached its fulfilment in his most eloquent and mind-blowing sermon that he gave by hanging upon the Cross.

There’s a lot that could be said about the Beatitudes, so for today I want to focus on a couple of them. Firstly I would just point out that the first beatitude is given in the present tense: “How happy are you who are poor: yours *is* the kingdom of God.” It’s not future tense—“yours *will be* the kingdom of God”—as the next three are. And so to me this suggests that, while it’s true that Christian discipleship must always be

carried out with one eye on the life to come—as I’ve already mentioned—we are called to prefigure it here and now as best we can.

But let’s go a little deeper with a couple of these. The second beatitude given here is: “Happy you who are hungry now: you shall be satisfied.” It’s worth asking: satisfied with what? With food? With fish and chips, or pizza? What kind of satisfaction or fulfilment are we talking about here? I would say that this isn’t simply a case of “do the right thing and you’ll be rewarded.” I think it goes a bit deeper than that – that in some way we will be filled with a sense of joy and meaning, once we understand what our life of simplicity, poverty, and even hardship, means in a larger context.

And this flows into the next beatitude: “Happy you who weep now: you shall laugh.” Again we can ask: at what? At what will we laugh when it’s laughing time? Does it mean that all the weeping will eventually pay off, and all our tears will have earned a few compensatory laughs? Again, I think it goes a bit deeper than this.

Let me get into it with a little story. A friend of mine once mentioned a retreat he’d been on, during which the participants were asked at one point to chart the emotional peaks and valleys of their lives. When things had gone well for them and all was good, and when they had had down times, and were sad and suffering and disappointed and so forth.

Then, as follow-up exercise, the retreatants were asked to locate in their lives the moments when they felt they were closest to God – when they *just knew* that God was working on them and through them in a powerful way. And, lo and behold, for pretty much everyone on this retreat, they noticed that—in hindsight—the moments when they felt closest to God invariably corresponded to the troughs in their lives – to those moments when they were sad and broken and things were falling apart.

Now, in some respects this little exercise from this retreat is what the Bible itself does over and over again. The Bible is continually saying to its readers: “Look back, and you will be amazed, and you will laugh at what you used to weep over. You will realise that it was when you were in the desert, that God was there; that when you were in captivity in Babylon, that God was there; that when you were losing at the game of history, God was there. In other words, in the light of the risen Christ, you look back, and precisely at those moments in which you wept, you now laugh, because you see something there that you wouldn’t trade for anything.

Now this is not some kind of cheap optimism that says things weren’t really all that bad—it may well have been terrible; it may well be that if you could somehow go back and change it all you absolutely would—but nonetheless, in the light of Christ you recognise that something powerful and consequential has taken place, something to do with the mystery of real liberation.

And what the mystery of liberation says to us is that we don’t have to be afraid. It says to us what the Cross proclaims loud and clear – namely, that even *there* the God

revealed in Jesus Christ is present, and is able to transform our suffering into something *good*, into new life.

So when Jesus says, “Happy you who weep now: you shall laugh,” it’s not just about some compensation we might get later on (although it might be that too). But I think on a deeper level it points to the fact that, in a very real and mysterious way, suffering and joy are not entirely separated—they are not at war with each other—and to see this, and to embrace it, is—on a spiritual level—to be free.

The reason why this is freedom is that the conventional wisdom which seeks comfort and wealth and prestige also has another incontrovertible truth – and that is that death has the final say. “All things die, nothing lives forever, and that’s just the way things are.” Well, our Lord’s upside-down logic has won for us the greatest of consolations – namely, that in the Christian dispensation, *death does not have the last word*.

In the Resurrection of Christ, death definitively lost its sting. Only in the light of Easter can we start to make sense of the Beatitudes, because the power and beauty of the Risen Christ exposes just how inadequate and illusory are the vanities of this passing world.

So the Christian can indeed rejoice at being counted among the losers of this world, because *this world is passing away, but the Kingdom of God lasts forever*. And, in a remarkable way, it is precisely *through* those times when things fall apart, that God is doing his most significant work in us, and preparing us for the glory of Eternal Life. Amen.