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Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God'.

I speak to you in the name of one, almighty and merciful God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Today's gospel is really tough. It certainly is hard to hear for a seminarian who drives a Mercedes and preaches from an iPad. Luke's Great Sermon on the Plain is a radical and counter-cultural call to discipleship in which Jesus summons us to go against the grain of the world. We are asked to ride against the tide of the society in which we live today. David Ostendorf, a theologian and minister in the United Church of Christ, once called this passage: 'the raw, unvarnished, faith-rattling declaration of the realm of God'. No matter how much we try to sugar coat and tame these beatitudes, they still have the indisputable capacity for tearing apart the mainstream worldview that we so often hold...that is, if only we dare to listen to them.

Unlike the Matthean Sermon on the Mount, in which we read: '*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God*', Luke is straight to the point: 'blessed are you who are poor'. There is no place for misunderstanding here. Jesus unequivocally turns towards the dispossessed and the destitute, those who have no material wealth and their existence is entirely dependent on God's grace and the open hearts of the people among whom they live.

Scholars argue that Jesus's beatitudes came to overturn a thousand-year-old tradition of one form of Jewish piety that associated both wealth and success with God's favour and belief that people's morally sound behaviour may bring about their God-endowed prosperity. Some Jewish factions of the time believed; and unfortunately, even some Christians today still hold

this view; that illness, disease (dis-ease) are divine punishment for morally corrupt behaviour. They saw both physical illness and destitution as signs of God's displeasure with those affected individuals. And yet, here we have Jesus completely turning this worldview upside down. There is no place for divine approbation of prosperity and wealth here.

I believe that today, just as in the days of Jesus, many of us here, certainly including myself, when talking about poverty and wealth, obscurity and fame, would scratch our heads and say: 'Did I hear him right? Blessed are the poor? Woe to you when all speak well of you? Hold on a second, I thought surely many of the poor just didn't work hard enough. If only they spent all these long night hours studying just as I did. Were my parents wrong to teach me to build people's trust, to always give a great first impression, or to work towards having an impeccable resume? *'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'*

Moreover, I'm not quite sure that being poor alone, in other words merely having materially little, is the basis for this blessing. The poor are often in such a disadvantaged position because they are seen by society as expendable, unimportant, and disposable. Unfortunately, the society that we live in today, and sadly many churches too, would gladly get rid of the homeless, of that old unshaven, intoxicated, potentially mentally unstable and smelly man who comes to sit in a back pew to get warm in winter. How important is it then for all of us, with no regard for social status, political affiliation, religious denomination, economic ideology, or nationality, to be constantly reminded of Jesus' words?! *'Blessed are you who are poor ..., who are hungry now ..., who weep now ..., blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you.'*

I read that our country is currently under 32 active states of emergency. The latest one allegedly instituted to respond to the so-called illegal immigrant 'invasion' on our southern border. Back in the days, wars were waged between armies and on battlefields. Modern warfare sees no such boundaries, it does not recognise a distinction between a civilian and a soldier, an army barrack or a place of worship. Today's wars in Syria, Afghanistan, or Yemen

are fought in people's living rooms and bombs, including ours, fall on the beds of little children. Likewise, economic deprivation, systematic failure of state structures, vicious gang warfare and organised crime have led to a large-scale internal and international displacement in Central America. Indeed, it is the refugees and asylum seekers, like those whom Grace wonderfully welcomed last night for a dinner together, know first-hand what it means to be poor, to be reviled, to be excluded, to weep in pain, and to look to God alone for solace. The more emptyhanded, downtrodden and crashed we find ourselves, the fiercer we search for God's comfort and consolation.

Yet, it is also a mistake to read this Gospel message as a moralistic call to shed all material wealth or as a glorification of poverty and pain. Surely, Jesus did not intend to extol experiences of constant insecurity, deprivation and malnutrition. I believe that we can find some worthy guidance here in the words of St Leo the Great, the 5th century Bishop of Rome. He wrote in a commentary to our Gospel: 'It is undoubtedly true that the poor achieve humility more readily than the rich; the former may develop a loving meekness, the latter an arrogant spirit. Yet many rich people become humble, for they use their wealth, not to feed their own pride, but to help their neighbours, and count it a great gain to be able to relieve the needs of others'. It certainly is consistent, in my view, with God's plan and a true blessing to all of us to use our wealth wisely in the service of the least of us.

Indeed, this text originally addressed to the twelve disciples consistently tears us away from our own complacency and calls us into action for social justice in the world around us. Gay Byron, the Dean of Howard University's School of Divinity, reminds that Luke's 'beatitudes and woes ... should be looked upon as a direct pressing challenge for the disciples ... to reorient relationships and reverse social, economic, and political injustices so that they gain right standing in the eyes of God'. I would argue that as Christian disciples we have a clear mandate to build the kingdom of God that recognises the poor and the disadvantaged as holding a specially privileged and blessed place before the face of God.

So, are we beyond salvation because of our wealth? Certainly not according to Luke, who despite such stark woes offers us success stories of Zacchaeus, Joseph Barnabas, Cornelius, or Lydia. All of whom were of considerable means and yet rested all their faith and hope in God alone. Hence, Luke's Gospel clearly calls us to re-examine our relationship to earthly wealth and to revisit our own life priorities. Do fame and fortunes distract us from being in a right relationship with God, or are we putting them to good use because of that wilful and genuinely loving relationship with our Creator? Does our dependence on earthly goods stop us from entrusting ourselves to God's care and his never-ceasing mercy?

The Collect for this week starts with: 'O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you' clearly narrating to the Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah. I believe it is then also here that we find the last piece of this big puzzle. 'Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord'. God wants the entirety of our life. He yearns for our attention. God wishes that we entrust our lives, our daily choices, our pain and successes to his ever gracious and faithful care. I believe that it is good for us when despite all the noise of our existence and all the riches of our life experiences, the world nevertheless leaves a void in our hearts, an empty space that needs filling. That emptiness becomes a place in which we are invited to encounter God's presence. It is when we are poor, or when we experience that painful void that we become rich in God.

To be blessed is to be able to sing after Saint Julian of Norwich: 'O God .. only thee have I all'. Unfortunately; or if we truly take heed of Jesus' words for today then, *fortunately*, it is at a moment of some utterly life-alternating loss that we come to learn who we truly are and what our life is all about. It is in that weeping with pain at a loss of someone, or on a day when the job that we love so much is taken away from us and our house is soon after foreclosed that we reach out to God, whose grace and mercy towards us knows no boundaries. We will surely still feel pain and our lives will be hard, and not everything will be fine. But, as Julian of Norwich said: 'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well' for

'Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died' and in Christ is our resurrection.

Amen.