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Luke won't let us blink or turn away. He portrays Jesus as looking up at the people of the world and addressing us with the words, "Blessed are you who are poor" and "Woe to you who are rich."

We who call ourselves Christians and hold citizenship in one of the wealthiest countries in the world ought to cringe when we hear that. Jesus calls us to look at everything we have and reconsider what we hope for. When we survey our abundance and recognize what we count on for security, it is pretty stark to hear, "You have received your consolation."

There is no getting off the hook. Luke wrote his Gospel for a community like ours, people who lived in an economically and socially unequal society. He demonstrated how Jesus consistently stood with the poor and marginalized. We will see this in detail as we go through Luke's Gospel this year.

Luke portrays Jesus as revealing his intentions when he first described his mission as good news to the poor. Luke develops that theme in multiple ways. In a society in which women were insignificant, Luke highlights their Gospel roles as disciples who loved Jesus deeply, supported him with their goods, and participated in his mission. Jesus' special concern for the poor, the marginal and the sinner is a central feature

in Luke's unique parables of the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, and the widow and the unjust judge. Zacchaeus the tax collector convinced Jesus of his conversion by promising to give half his possessions to the poor, and Jesus advised his wealthy contemporaries to be sure that their banquets were frequented by the poor, blind, crippled and lame. That is a quick overview of the unique features of Luke's Gospel.

What are we who live in great comfort to make of this presentation of the "good news?" Rather than quibble and wiggle with phrases like "poverty of spirit," we need to face Luke's presentation of the Beatitudes as it is. Those of us who have been nourished well and received a decent education understand that we will never experience the poverty of our brothers and sisters who lack that foundation. At the same time, we know that there is nothing virtuous about destitution or malnutrition. Both truncate people's potential and are therefore dehumanizing. That is a far cry from blessedness.

The well-off seem constitutionally ineligible for the Beatitudes that Jesus presents until we come to the third, "Blessed are they who mourn." In Luke's Gospel, people weep for reasons of love or compassion. The widow of Nain and the synagogue official's friends wept for their dead children. Peter wept after betraying Jesus. The woman who washed Jesus' feet wept out of her great love for him. Jesus himself wept when he beheld Jerusalem, the city of God that was rejecting the salvation he offered.

In today's world, the blessed who weep are people who mourn over the suffering of others. They may begin with an anguished statement like, "I can't imagine the suffering of deported parents who are separated from their children." Then, they may move to question why there were 640,000 people who had to seek help from the Jesuit Refugee Service in 2017. They will finally be moved to echo John the Baptist's followers who asked, "What can we do?"

The blessed who weep are people who share God's concern for the poor and the hungry. When they understand that theirs are the only hands God can use to make a difference, their compassion will not let them rest until they go into action. They will feel impelled to make a difference. They will understand that they are implicated by what is said in "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home" by Pope Francis: "Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies" (#5).

When others' suffering leads people to work for change, they begin to belong to the category of those who will be hated, excluded, insulted and denounced on account of the Son of Man. No one effectively calls for conversion or protests injustice without paying the cost. But their activity buys them a place among that mysterious group of God's blessed ones whose hopes are shaped by the needs of their most vulnerable brothers and sisters. Their commitment may end up making them poor, but they will experience a blessedness that is priceless.

### **JEREMIAH 17:5-8**

"Cursed is the one who trusts in human beings!" At first blush, we might take this reading as the biblical source for Burt Bacharach's famous lyrics, "What do you get when you fall in love? You only get lies and pain and sorrow." Jeremiah's God sounds like a deceived lover or betrayed friend who berates himself for ever having trusted another. But when we continue on, the reliance on the Lord that Jeremiah promotes turns out to be more of a guide about trust than a warning to avoid placing confidence in others. Jeremiah's warning instructs us that no individual or group, no leader, political party or institution merits blind trust or obedience. That truth is part of the world's legacy from World War II along with plenty of contemporary scandals.

Today, we might take Jeremiah's words as advice to help us deal with scandal in the church. Jeremiah warns us that allowing anyone — pope, bishop, religious or lay — to represent the trustworthiness of Christianity and its Gospel is a first step toward blasphemy; it gives God's authority to someone who is not God. Blind trust or unquestioning obedience gives to humans what belongs to God. Ironically, to say "I won't believe in the church because it has bad leadership," is another way to "trust in human beings." When we abandon the church on account of the sin of its leaders, we are defining church by its membership rather than by the God who continually calls it into being. Instead of measuring the church by the behavior of its members, believers must call the entire church to stand before the judgment of the Gospel. When we allow the Gospel to be the light guiding our lives, we accept the fact that no one is above criticism. When we accept the fact that neither we nor any other person or group can adequately speak for God, we can begin to trust in the Spirit to lead us forward as the fallible people we are.

Unfortunately, it is always easier to find and denounce flaws than to discern the correct road. It is simpler and not very costly to curse what we see as evil than to describe, praise and replicate what is good. What are we to do if we do not enjoy a

direct conduit to knowing God's will? How do we practice trust in the Lord?

The first step toward discerning what is of God is to subject our own judgments and those we hear to a healthy Gospel critique that begins with the question, "Who benefits from the opinion or practice we hear promoted?" The closer we or other opinion-makers are to benefiting from a policy or suggestion, the more we must question its Gospel roots. If a policy or process is self-serving, designed to protect or preserve an institution rather than the most vulnerable among us, it does not spring from the Gospel but rather reflects Jeremiah's barren, unchanging bush stuck in a lava waste. If, on the other hand, leaders and their policies inspire people to generosity of spirit and the supple adaptability of living plants, if they provide the vulnerable with opportunities to thrive, we can recognize them as worthy of our confidence because they lead us to trust in the Lord.

### **PSALM 1:1-2, 3-4, 6**

"Blessed," the first word of this psalm begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and "vanishes," the final word, begins with the last. According to Gianfranco Ravasi in his book, *Una comunidad lee los Salmos*, the composer set this up to indicate that everything one needs to know is contained in this first psalm. The author also designed this song to begin with blessing the righteous and to end with the statement that evil leads to nothingness.

Psalm 1 complements our reading from Jeremiah, offering a classic image of the two roads. Unlike Robert Frost's roads that seem equal, these are opposites. The people who are blessed avoid bad company and spend time prayerfully considering God's plan for the world. Their nurturing way of life is good for them and for the world.

The half of the psalm which deals with evil is ultimately as promising as the first. In a world in which it seems that evildoers prosper and can bring about what they will, it is a beautiful thing to hear, "Not so the wicked, not so." For all their self-aggrandizement and egoism, they ultimately count for nothing. The lives they have created have no more importance than the chaff carried off by the breeze to become mulch for another field.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 15:12, 16-20**

This reading might sound esoteric, as if Paul were dealing with some philosophical renegades among the Corinthians in a debate that has nothing to do with us. The

reality is surprisingly different.

Some of the Corinthians were teaching that there was no bodily resurrection. That flew in the face of the core Gospel that Paul believed and preached. Paul's conversion to Christian faith was based on an encounter with the risen Christ, and all his subsequent preaching was based on that experience. The Acts of the Apostles recounts Paul's experience three times, and one of the common elements in all three retellings is that the risen Christ identified himself with the community gathered in his name. That is the background to what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 12 about the community as the body of Christ: What happened to Christ in the resurrection will happen to the members of his body.

Once again, we are touching into the heart of Paul's mysticism, his understanding that Christ is alive in us, both individually and collectively. That is the heart of Paul's theology. He believed that by becoming one with humanity, Christ led the way for humanity to become one with God. (Philippians 3:6-10; Galatians 2:20.)

This part of Paul's discussion of Christ's resurrection reveals what he saw as the razor-sharp distinction between Christianity and other expressions of an ethical life. In effect, he teaches that anyone who denied the resurrection recognized Jesus as nothing more than a good man to be honored and imitated. Paul does not deny Jesus' goodness, but his understanding of Christ is radically different from such an approach. For Paul, Christianity rests on the reality that Jesus was the Son of God incarnate and that his resurrection revealed the powerlessness of sin and death. Christ was not just an example. For the believer, Christ is the risen Lord. As such, he is source of real life and the rationale for everything they do.

Christ's resurrection is the bedrock of Paul's faith. If Christ is not raised, there is no reason to bother with Christianity, and anyone who sacrifices for it is to be pitied. But Christ has become the source of life for those who have experienced the power of his resurrection (Philippians 3:7-11). That power now operating in them is the source of their faith that nothing can separate them from the love of God (Romans 8:38).

### **LUKE 6:17, 20-26**

Many people identify today's reading as a version of "The Sermon on the Mount." In reality, only the Gospel of Matthew (5-7) presents it as a discourse on a mountain. In contrast with Matthew's presentation, Luke sets the stage by having Jesus come

down from the mountain where he had been praying before naming the Twelve who would be called apostles. When they came to the level ground where a crowd awaited him, Jesus addressed his disciples with the words we hear in today's Gospel.

Beginning with his blunt, "Blessed are you who are poor," Luke's presentation of Jesus' blessings and curses is much more direct than Matthew's seemingly gentler, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Jesus' word for "poor" (ptochos) referred to people who were bowed down or cowering like beggars. It was the same word Jesus used to describe Lazarus, the poor man who crouched near the gate of a wealthy man who never noticed him. (Luke 16:20.)

To many in Israel, poverty was a curse, a sign of God's disfavor. Humanly, it is difficult to believe in the blessedness of the poor. Rather than rejoice in Psalm 34 which says that the Lord is close to the brokenhearted, we are more comfortable with Psalm 1 which declares that those who love God are like trees planted near streams that yield their fruit and whose leaves never wither. We want to believe that the good prosper and therefore that prosperity is a sign of goodness in God's sight. But that is not what Jesus taught, neither in this homily nor by the example of his life.

Luke makes it very clear that the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the rejected are particularly blessed in God's eyes, while those who have more than they need and think their affluence gives them the security to laugh at tomorrow are the ones to be pitied. Jesus' message is scathingly direct: He says "you" to both the poor and the rich, the hungry and the satiated, those who weep about the conditions of their world and those who enjoy them.

What are we to do as we hear this message? We live in one of the richest countries in the world. Those among us who are well-educated or trained for work and who have strong connections cannot ever be poor like people whose income hovers under \$5 per day. Nor would an increase in such poverty be a good thing.

If we really desire the blessings Jesus promises in this selection, it seems that our only entry point is by being among those who weep. Luke mentions weeping at least three times as often as does any other evangelist. In addition to the Beatitudes, Luke portrays people weeping over death (7:13, 8:52); he shows Peter weeping after denying Jesus (22:62); and he mentions the weeping of the woman who washed

Jesus' feet (7:38). Most uniquely, Luke tells us that Jesus himself wept over the city of Jerusalem, the city that was about to demand his death. (19:41) Luke portrays holy tears as the response to conversion, death, betrayal and hardness of heart.

In the apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis explains the woe of a world without weeping. Elaborating on Jesus' words, Francis warns us, "Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own" (#54).

Because of our privilege, most of us will never be truly poor or hungry. But there are very few among us who are incapable of compassion, the openness to others that makes us vulnerable to their pain. If we wish to be among the blessed in Jesus' reign of God, we must learn from and about the poor so that their hope becomes our own. Then, step by step, we will experience beatitude.

## **Planning: Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By Lawrence Mick

This Sunday and the next two Sundays will bring us readings we don't often hear, since they often get lost in the shift from Ordinary Time to Lent/Easter and back again. Since Easter is relatively late this year (April 21), we get a few extra weeks of Ordinary Time before Lent begins.

Today's texts fit well into the run up to Lent. They present us with decisions about the choices we make in life, which is what Lent does as well.

The first reading from Jeremiah offers us a clear choice between trusting in God or trusting in human beings. One way leads to a full life. The question is: Will we choose to thrive? The psalm continues the imagery and the question. The second reading asks if we ground our hope in the promise of resurrection or only in what this life has to offer. The Gospel brings us Luke's version of the Beatitudes. Rather than eight blessings, he has four blessings and four woes, again highlighting the choices we all have to make.

These choices are really about where we place our hope: in the Lord, in the promise of resurrection, and in the coming of the kingdom. Where we place our hope is really a way of saying where our faith is grounded.

While these themes are solid bases for the preachers this weekend, planners can also draw on them rather easily. Look for songs that speak about faith and in whom we place our hope, for songs that call us to choose the Lord, for songs that invite us to trust in God's love and providence. In writing petitions, consider doing them in pairs that express our choices. For example, pray that we may avoid trusting too much in those who promise happiness they cannot provide, and then pray to trust God as the solid rock of our faith. You could also use Luke's beatitudes to pray for the poor, the hungry, the sorrowing and those who are persecuted and rejected. Then pray for the rich, the satisfied, those who lead pleasant lives and those who are well respected, that they might wake up to God's perspective.

Don't overlook the imagery in the readings either, especially in the first reading and the psalm. The images of the barren bush and the tree planted by the water can be incorporated into the petitions as well as, perhaps into an introduction to the liturgy today. Another spot the images may be useful is in the penitential rite if you use the third form. The deacon or presider could involve Christ as the one who restores the barren bush, the one who provides the water for life, and the one who offers life that never ends.

## **Prayers: Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By Joan DeMerchant\_

### **Introduction**

In these politically-charged times, we often question one another's values. We assume we can identify our own, but it is not always easy. At some point, we all need to consider where our faith is rooted and what difference that makes in our life choices. Today's readings address these centuries-old questions quite directly. They matter, because who and what we believe in undergirds every aspect of our lives. What would our personal inventories reveal?



## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you spoke to and blessed those who are in need: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you challenged those who lived satisfying lives: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to examine our own lives and choices: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We pray now for the needs of the world and for the grace to examine our own lives.

**Minister** For Pope Francis, our bishops and the whole church, may our faith in Christ's resurrection be seen in our love and care for those in need, we pray:

- For all the world's poor; and for those whose comfortable living standards ignore the needs of the poor or contribute to their suffering, we pray:
- For those who are hungry, who never have enough food for minimal sustenance; and for those who over consume or whose habits diminish the world's resources and environment, we pray:
- For those living in anxiety, depression or with any kind of sorrow or grief; and for those who cause their suffering or choose to ignore it, we pray:
- For those who are persecuted or excluded for any reason; and for those who demean or consider as inferior anyone who is different, we pray:
- For the United States as the country celebrates Presidents' Day, in appreciation for all who have dedicated their lives to the common good and to the responsibility of all to build a better world, we pray:

**Presider** Gracious God, you grant us the luxury and freedom of choices. We can live trusting and hoping in humans and things, or we can trust and hope in you and Christ's resurrection. May we choose to live and act in the fullness of your love for all our days. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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