

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday before Lent 2019 (Proper 2) Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Nijmegen 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:20-31

**Blessed are those Rooted in the God of the Resurrection**

Greetings from Groningen! Those of you who were here way back when I served as chaplain (2005-2011), will remember my wife and children. Our eldest will turn 18 on Wednesday, and is off to university next autumn. So this past summer, as we reckoned it might well be our last family holiday all together, we went to the Western US, where I had once studied, to show the kids some of the wonders of California, Arizona, Nevada and Utah.

Having not lived in that part of the world for 20 years, I was reminded what dry climates are like. And as we toured those western American deserts, we were shocked to hear that the Netherlands was subjected to comparable temperatures (though not quite as low levels of humidity).

But something always strikes me about deserts: there's always more vegetation than I expect, not just empty sand dunes. Even in Death Valley (the lowest place in N America) there are a few resilient shrubs and cacti, despite average summer temperatures of 52° C and 51 mm of rain annually.

Now having stepped out of the car to take pictures into what felt like an oven, I don't envy those plants. Neither does the Prophet Jeremiah.

He compares the situation they're in to how it is for those who place more faith in the passing circumstances of the world around them than in their Eternal, Living and Loving God.

Without trust in God, things can be callous and dry. When worldly conditions change, as they do, when public opinion shifts, or the economy takes a turn for the worse, or health

deteriorates, we can feel abandoned, even cursed, and lose perspective and hope.

It is a sad but not unfamiliar phenomenon: situational depression and dissatisfaction. But Jeremiah points us to the spiritual, in hopes we will seek to be rooted in what can truly sustain us in all circumstances – our connection with God.

God remains there for us in a capricious world. In the wake of Valentine's Day, Jeremiah's words call us away from a superficial obsession into deeper, committed love that is meaningful. The kind God epitomizes. After all:

<sup>9</sup>The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? <sup>10</sup>I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

My kids also rode a rollercoaster in Santa Cruz, CA. Ironic, that, too. Our human hearts can take us up and down, and round about; our emotions can exhilarate us and confound us time and again. Yet the Lord of the Santa Cruz, the Holy Cross *and* the Resurrection remains with us. If we trust Him for safety, sustenance and wisdom, we can put our emotional experiences of our topsy-turvy world in healthy perspective.

Jeremiah knew this well. His career began in 627 BC, in a time of national promise under King Josiah. But with Josiah's death there came a period of great tension, leading up to the Babylonian invasion in 597 BC, a horrid catastrophe. Not unlike that faced by afflicted civilians in Syria, Yemen, Venezuela and elsewhere – even here in Nijmegen 75 years ago this week.. Jeremiah put his own life in grave danger by denouncing the nation's errors: they needed to turn to God, repent and cease sinning. Here, Jeremiah offers a stylistic

seed that Jesus develops in his Beatitudes in Luke's Gospel: a contrast between blessings and woes.

Jeremiah's sees serious trouble for those who reject God and trust only in themselves and temporary wealth and power. He proclaims God's blessing on 'those who trust in the Lord'.

The latter have roots that tap into God in the way that a tree might have roots that reach deep into a stream. Blessed are those who remain rooted in the Eternal Living God, blessed are those who give their hearts to the truly Loving God. They will make it through the inevitable years of drought in their lives, while those who do not trust in God will suffer anxiety.

Have you ever noticed how people with deep faith remain calm? Even in turbulent times? Because being rooted in God gives them a stable foundation and spiritual sustenance. Jesus' own calm in the storm shocked his disciples. But he was shocked, in turn, by their relative lack of faith.

Today, Jesus comes down from the mountain where he had been praying – a source of his strength. After conversing with God the Father, not unlike Moses coming down from Sinai to speak to the elders of the people, Jesus addresses a great crowd of his disciples about God's vision for *HIS* Kingdom.

This vision, again, is quite contrary to the principles and practices they and we still live in. Like Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus starts here with Beatitudes: 'Blessed is ...'. Straight away, we see the stark contrast between the values of the Kingdom of God, and the ways of the world, and the woes it will suffer. In Luke, Jesus focuses on the concrete realities – poverty, hunger, persecution. And in Luke, Jesus is quite direct: 'Blessed are the poor, for *yours is* the kingdom of God' [not theirs].

*Makarios*, 'blessed', could be better translated as 'happy', even 'overjoyed'. How can the poor and hungry possibly be happy? Those who weep, delighted? Those who are hated because they love Christ, overjoyed?

And note that Jesus proclaims blessings for the both present time and future: 'yours is the kingdom of God', but 'you will be filled' and 'you will laugh', 'for surely your reward is great in heaven.' The Kingdom has come with Christ, but it's fullness is still to come.

And like Jeremiah, Jesus also warns of the woes: woe to the rich, the well-fed, those who celebrate this momentary life alone. Like dust in the wind of the desert, this will all go. If this life is all we see and care about, that's all there is.

Just like Mary's Magnificat, where God is shown to have

3        mercy on those who fear him,  
4        for he has shown strength with his arm \*  
and has scattered the proud in their conceit,  
5        Casting down the mighty from their thrones \*  
and lifting up the lowly.  
6        He has filled the hungry with good things \*  
and sent the rich away empty.

Jesus' words are revolutionary, challenging the materialistic mentality that still dominates, even if crises political and economic, past and present, should be teaching us wisdom.

But it is never too late to return to the Lord, and to come into his blessings. Jesus' self-declared mission was to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to give sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. In our world today, poverty and wealth exist side by side, hunger and over-eating, tears and laughter, abuse and acclaim. Why are some happy to live in a temporary, earthly, material form of heaven, while others go through something like hell?

This is not what God wants, what Jesus teaches. But with the help of the Spirit of God, we can bring change for the good.

Jeremiah and Jesus are calling us and our world, to think bigger, deeper, more spiritually. And if we do, and we seek the Lord's will for Creation, then, ironically, material things will likely sort themselves out better for all. Think how different the world would be if love for all were at the core of all social policy! Why do we not look more to Heaven to help the Earth?

Jesus did. His teaching here is *perfectly practical* and transformative. Loving enemies, turning one's cheek, and sharing resources are all far more sane and effective than so much of what we keep doing instead. When have revenge or selfishness ever really blessed us?

Christ, the first fruit of the risen life of the living and loving God, is just trying to show us how to see through the fraudulent and failed materialism of so many false prophets, and instead to flourish, find and share the joy of the faith, and bear real fruit. For the good of all. Why not? Amen.

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