

## Sermon: 2019/02/17 (6th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C), Jeremiah 17:5-10 and Luke 6:17-26\_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

Today, we hear the prophet Jeremiah teaching us by way of a "parable."

It sorta goes like this:

*Imagine* for a moment, he says, two identical trees. - the *same* tree, actually. One of them is planted in the 'desert'; 'the parched places of the wilderness'. (It is dry and very hot.)

["Plant" a cardboard cutout of a tree into a bucket of sand.]

And the other one, he says, is planted in a fertile, green valley by a 'stream' - a river' of water.

["Plant" a cardboard cutout of a tree into a bucket of rich, dark compost and water it from a can.]

Okay?

Now, in which location will the tree do best?

[Wait for response.]

*Right!*

The tree by the stream in good soil.

Well, Jeremiah says that the tree that dies 'in the desert' is the Christian person who puts their trust in other people.

People, says Jeremiah - even friends and family - will go against their word; break promises, and... Let. Us. Down.

It is a sad fact of reality.

Human people and human systems - like banks and governments - will disappoint us because '[t]he heart is devious above else; it is perverse'.

So, if we rely on people - for our happiness and well-being - too much, we will end up like this tree and wither and die. [Point to sand.]

[Pick up the healthy, green "tree."]

*But God will always* love us.

He will *always* care for us.

And He will *always* keep His promises - promises of life-after-death and joy and peace.

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

There are, at least, *two* questions to be asked about our gospel this morning: *Firstly*, is this the (famous) 'Sermon on the Mount' that we know from *Matthew*? It certainly sounds like it, right?

A *lot* like it.

There's many undeniable 'striking similarities between the two'.<sup>[n.1]</sup>

But if it is, why does *Luke specify* that the words we just heard were spoken (by Jesus) 'on a *level* place'.

Which is it?!

Is this a contradiction?

Has one of them - either *Matthew* or *Luke* - misremembered this incident?

And if one of them has got the location wrong, what other factual details are mistakes in their gospels?

And when you start to go down that "path," you end up in a very scary and unnerving place indeed, don't you?

*Ultimately*, you might be left wondering to yourself: "Is the Bible a house of cards waiting to collapse? - And with it my hope in eternal life and the goodness of God?"

*Or*, can this small detail be easily explained?

Well, of course it can.

A 'level place' - in Greek, "πεδινός" ["pedinos"] - 'means a "plateau" in a mountainous area'.<sup>[n.2]</sup>

In other words, Jesus delivered His longest - *and greatest(!)* - "bloc" of teaching not perched precariously on a jagged peak. - Have you ever done those exercises on "a wobble-board"? It makes everything so much harder - takes a lot of core strength - down in your abs - to stay upright and steady, and to not shake too much.

And this *wasn't* our Savior.

No, he found a 'level place' where he could "plant" His feet but at a height *above* the 'crowd' so that He could "throw" His voice to the very back - at the top of "a mount."

Now, notice that *Luke* says Jesus 'looked up' at His audience: verse 20.

*Matthew* explains at this point of the speech, Jesus 'sat',<sup>[5:1]</sup> which makes perfect sense of that orientation of His gaze.

*In other words*, the two accounts compliment each other wonderfully.

In fact, to get the full picture, you should read them side-by-side; like two halves of a person's face:

mostly symmetrical, and neither the whole.

That's the first question dealt with.

And the second, *glaring* one is:

"Is it blessed to be poor?"

Jesus seems to say so, right?

(In today's gospel extract.)

Is it blessed to be hungry?

To have an empty belly?

A groaning stomach?

And is it really blessed to be "excluded" and "reviled"?

Is it?!

Jesus seems to say so.

So, how can this be?

Does He really not know?!

Does He have some romantic, *unrealistic* picture of happy, laid-back peasants in mind?

Out in the fields swinging scythes and whistling as they work? [[Seven dwarves in Snow White.](#)]

That is to say, in this pre-industrial period before the rise of big, dirty cities, does Jesus have some remote, uninformed, idealized picture of the poor as rural, rustic care-free "hicks?"

Close-to-nature; "blissfully ignorant" - undisturbed by political dramas or bad headlines about faraway-places?

Unencumbered by the anxieties of the stock-market, by student loans and wealth-management or office-gossip; that the poor are Huckleberry Finn-types, merrily wandering from place-to-place, able to enjoy the simple pleasures of sunshine and wild-berry picking?

Because, in actual fact - and I'm sure that I don't need to say this: poverty is dreadful.

*It is a curse* - a "curse" irrespective of one's particular situation or skin-color:

'Think about the last time you were really busy - maybe work was more stressful than usual, you had a sick kid or the car was in the shop.

Did [other] things in your life start to slip through the cracks?

A bill or two didn't get paid on time, or you opened the fridge and were surprised to find it bare?'

Well, according to a *fascinating*, and - I think, very significant - 2016 [research-paper](#) by the University of Pennsylvania economist [Heather Schofield](#) - available online and well-worth a read, 'that experience [of forgetting things when overly busy or fretful] is a perfect example of what she and fellow researchers call

"[limited cognitive] bandwidth," ...

When ["bandwidth"] is [heavily] taxed [- by job-hunting, for instance, or facing living-in-poverty-related adversity], there's less of it available for use in [making] other [more far-seeing] judgements or decisions, leading to some potentially undesirable [short-term] choices (a late fee on your Visa, for example, or a trip through a drive-thru instead of heading to the grocery store).'

And so, like a vicious circle, the more complex and uncertain your situation, the less able you are to efficiently and effectively grapple with it.

*This is huge!*

Being poor, in other words, is a monstrous 'feedback loop'.[\[n.3\]](#)

It entraps men and women - *and children*, and diminishes their humanity in innumerable ways.

And the Bible doesn't "gloss over" this truth:

in fact, it *values material* security: this is why God manipulates history to ensure His people, Israel, gain possession of verdant Canaan, with its much-mentioned honey and its milk - those were very tradable, sought after commodities in the hungry Middle East.

And Jesus - although Himself from a middling, artisanal background:

His earthly, (adoptive) father Joseph, remember, was a carpenter[\[Mt. 13:55\]](#) - a professional, not-lucrative-but-very-respectable trade - came from an under-developed, provincial, land-locked "back-water": Galilee.

The *real* money was made in Jerusalem and in the new Roman "boom" towns "popping" up on the coast, like Caesarea.

Jesus, in other words, grew up around poverty: it was, in His home-town, 'commonplace', 'endemic'.[\[n.4\]](#)

He understood it very well.

Saw how it crushed people.

So, to restate our second question, how could He call it 'blessed'?

The key to the "lock" of correct interpretation in this passage is, I think, that phrase, easily overlooked, 'Then He looked up at His disciples and said...'

The "Beatitudes" that follow, therefore - that's what the list of 'blessed are you...' is called - are directed *at them*.[\[n.5\]](#)

This is 'plainly' true.[\[n.6\]](#)

And who are they?

Christ's handpicked, intimate group of twelve - those men that, last week, He recruited; those men that, last week, we heard Him say "Follow me" and they put down their nets and did exactly that.

Jesus, then, isn't speaking in general terms; not *in principle*.

He *isn't* saying that to have no money is fundamentally, *intrinsically* a good thing. No, He is saying something more nuanced and pointed:

that to be poor as the disciples were poor, which is to say, in their peculiar case, poor *for the sake of God* - that is rewarding; that is what is 'blessed': to make those sacrifices *for the Church*.

To follow Jesus *faithfully*, He Himself makes clear, will involve what the renowned theologian D. A. Carson calls 'a range of shocking ethical transformations: turning the other cheek to violence, recognizing that the heart is more fundamental than mere action, and forgiving others (because, quite frankly, we will not be forgiven unless we do). This stance is often associated with the [sombre attired, sectarian] Anabaptist movement,'<sup>[n.7]</sup> but is, in fact, meant to be *all* of our "stance."

This sermon, then, 'on the level place' - on "the mount," 'make[s] a mockery of the world's values.'<sup>[n.8]</sup>

And when we *embrace* that fact, we will discover something unexpected "on the other side" - The Kingdom of God, *breaking* into this chaotic, confused world, and bringing with it a different kind of riches - not "riches" that can be taken to the bank, we need some of that stuff and, as I've said, God *wants* us to have it, which is why, in the Old Testament, a premium is placed on hard work, but *why* does He want that?

So, *that we can give it away* - and spread our financial success around!

After all, exactly as in the case too he greedy landowner<sup>[see: Lk. 12:13-21]</sup>, money will do us no good in Heaven.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

#### Footnotes:

1. Osborne, Grant R. (March 1999), 'Historical Criticism and the Evangelical', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 42, No. 2, pp. 193-210, 200. (Available at [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/article\\_criticism\\_osborne.html](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_criticism_osborne.html), accessed February 14, 2019).
2. *Ibid.*
3. See: Anon (28th of December, 2016), 'Why Mental Bandwidth Could Explain the Psychology Behind Poverty', *Knowledge@Wharton*, available at <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/bandwidth-explain-psychology-behind-poverty/> (accessed February 14, 2019).
4. Root, Badley W. (2014), *First Century Galilee: A Fresh Examination of the Sources*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 159.

5. See: Blomberg, Craig L. (1999), *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, Nottingham: Apollos, 128.
6. Morris, Leon (2008), *Luke (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Volume 3)*, Downers Grove, I. L.; Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 146.
7. (2013), 'Kingdom, Ethics, and Individual Salvation', *Themelios*, Volume 38, No. 2, pp. 197-201, 197.
8. Morris (2008), 146.