

## Sermon for February 13, 2022

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

Today is designated as the 6th Sunday after Epiphany. That means that it has been six weeks since we celebrated the journey of the Wise Men to visit Jesus, and we have two more Sundays before we head into Lent, that deep penitential season that leads up to Easter.

As we’ve heard throughout this liturgical season, Epiphany means “manifestation” or “revelation.” We have spent this time focusing on the Epiphany or revelation of Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Redeemer of the world. How can we look at today’s Scripture readings in order to help accomplish this, to better understand the nature and message of Jesus?

Three of our four readings for today: Jeremiah, the Psalm, and the Gospel of Luke, all describe our relationship with God. And they all do so by presenting binary or contrasting statements.

Jeremiah states: “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.” Then he contrasts it by saying: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord.”

The Psalmist says similarly:

“Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, \*  
nor lingered in the way of sinners,  
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!”

...and then:

“...The wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, \*  
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.  
For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, \*  
but the way of the wicked is doomed.”

Luke’s Gospel, which is called the Sermon on the Plain, describes a scene in which Jesus speaks to a crowd of poor, sick, hungry, and miserable people, who have come to see him. Jesus says to them,

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
Blessed are you who are hungry,  
Blessed are you who weep,  
Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you.”

But then he contrasts this with his proclamation of “woe” to others.

“...Woe to you who are rich,  
Woe to you who are full,

Woe to you who are laughing,  
Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

To me it sounds that Jesus is echoing and expanding the words of both Jeremiah and the Psalmist. Doesn't it?

All of these Scriptures have in common that they describe contrasting descriptors:

Blessed and cursed.

Happy and wicked.

Righteous and doomed.

Blessed and woe.

Poor and rich.

Hungry and full.

Weeping and laughing.

Being hated and being well respected.

There are also contrasting metaphors, all of which would be familiar to ancient Palestine. The negative images include:

A shrub in the desert.

Parched places of the wilderness.

Uninhabited salt land.

Chaff blown away by the wind.

By contrast, the positive images are:

A tree planted by water, bearing fruit in due season.

And its leaves will stay green.

Delight in the law of the Lord.

Our world is full of binary choices. Many times, this is phrased as “there are two kinds of people in the world.” In fact, this phrase “two kinds of people” has created a number of jokes, which place people on opposite sides of a divide. They pit “us” against “them.” There are gender divides: men and women; political divides: Democrats and Republicans; racial divides: white people and black people; economic divides: rich people and poor people; generational divides: boomers and millennials.

But in these Bible readings there are two different kinds of people: people who please God loves and people who do not please God. So which of those describes us?

As Episcopalians, we don't really like this type of binary choice, especially when it comes to how we think about God. It seems rigid, antiquated, and unenlightened. It doesn't really describe who we are. Are we rich or are we poor? Hungry or full? Happy or wicked? Blessed or cursed? Righteous or doomed? Or are we somewhere in between, along a broad spectrum of human attributes, rather than at the far extremes? We don't like to think that our God puts us on one side or another. We

like to believe that when we are good, God loves us, and when we are bad he excuses our bad behaviors. And because God is love, he loves us all the time, right?

The origin of Anglican and Episcopal teaching was to embrace the middle way, the path between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation, which was called *via media*. Nowadays are told to embrace “both-slash-and” thinking, rather than “either/or.” We kind of like the “gray area.” The ambiguity is part of our faith life.

What strikes me as strange about Luke’s Beatitudes, is that the things that Jesus calls “blessed”—being poor, being hungry, being in mourning, and being hated—don’t really seem very blessed at all. In fact they seem pretty downright miserable. And the things that he says are worthy of woe—being rich, being full, laughing, and being respected—all these seem pretty good. Is Jesus really telling us that we should become poor and hungry and hated? I don’t think so. So how do we understand the meaning of Jesus’s words in the Sermon on the Plain?

One thing we can do is to start by looking at the original message of Epiphany, which began as the light of a star which led the wise men to Jesus at his birthplace. “Light from light.” That star is itself a metaphor for the revelation of Jesus to the world.

And we can also look at these words, **not** as a set of instructions. They are **descriptive**, not **prescriptive**. This is not a set of rewards and punishments. Jesus is describing a world which is unlike the world in which they all live. And he is

describing a future world in which things seem topsy-turvy compared to life on earth. He is describing the Kingdom of God.

We need to remember that the audience Jesus was speaking to was a huge crowd of people who had come from far away to hear him: poor people with little or no means of income, sick people who wanted to be healed, troubled people who were desperate to be cured of unclean spirits. This audience was not the rich, the full, the laughing, or the respected members of society.

In ancient times, to be blessed by God was considered something that was only the available to the tiny elite members of society, the rich, and the well-to-do. Jesus, in talking about the Kingdom of God, was offering these poor people a message of light and of hope. He was telling them that—**despite** their being poor, sick, hungry, or hated—that God loves them, favors them, and will offer them his blessings. They only need to lead good lives and trust in God.

That was a radical message! And one for which Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice.

But what is a great message! It is one which we can embrace too. This is the message of the Beatitudes: Whatever is troubling us in our lives, whether we be sick or poor or grieving or hated or whatever, God loves us too. We just have to lead good lives and trust in God.

That is the light of Epiphany. Amen.

