

Holy Spirit of Truth; enlighten our minds and open our hearts that we might have the courage to live together in your love, this day and always. Amen.

Sermon 16 February 2025

Readings

Jeremiah 17.5–10

Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD.

They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.

They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green;

in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?

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.

1 Corinthians 15.12–20

If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

Luke 6.17–26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

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‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

‘Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

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

SERMON

In recognition of Valentine’s Day just passed, I will open with some words about Love by the French Catholic priest Michel Quoist, from his 1954 book, *Prayers of Life*.

We are made by love and for love. On earth we learn to love. . . . There are but two loves, love of self and love of God and of others. To live is to choose between these two loves¹.

Quoist distinguishes between the loves which Jesus commanded of his disciples, a love of God and of others, a love that moves outwards, and a very different sort of love, what he calls, love of self, a love turned inwards. Quoist makes it clear that this doesn’t refer to self-care and self-regard which is a natural good, but instead is the love in which we choose to prioritise ourselves over others. He explains:

Love of self chooses the best part and keeps the best place

Love of self indulges my senses and supplies them from the table of others.

Love of self speaks about myself and make me deaf to the words of others

Love of self puts on a false front, it wants me to shine, overshadowing others.

Love of self is self-pitying, and overlooks the suffering of others

As famously explored by CS Lewis in his book *The Four Loves*, our word love can mean many things. Whilst associated with romance and erotic love at this time of year, Love of course more broadly describes the most profoundly creative and generative love of God, and the huge range of ways humankind can participate in that outward facing love. However, love can also be a cover-

¹ Michel Quoist, “Prayers of Life”, trans. Anne Marie de Commaile and Agnes Mitchell Forsyth, 1963
Dublin: Logos Books, p. 79-80.

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word for the multitude of sins that come from using others to meet our unfulfilled needs.

In the context of our own loving relationships, if we look carefully and honestly, we might discover different and arguably conflicting forms of love active within us, the love of desire for intimacy with another, the love which wishes the flourishing of the other, and the often shadowy love of self which drives us to achieve a sense of power or security through exploiting, co-ercing or manipulating those others whom we profess to love. Untangling the generative from the damaging aspects of love, both in the love we give and the love we receive, may be a lifelong challenge for many of us.

We can consider the passages we have heard today from the perspective of love. Just as Quoist considers two very different forms of loving, in the passages from Jeremiah and the Gospel we have just heard, we are encouraged to think in binaries.

Jeremiah presents two different ways of relating to God. One way leads to life, to blessedness, and one to desolation, a state described so potently as living in the parched places of the wilderness, an uninhabited salt land. A place of thirst and isolation. Jesus focuses on people who occupy contrasting positions in life, pronouncing blessing on one and woe on another.

It is all too easy to read Bible passages like these and conclude that they refer to two distinct groups of people...the blessed and the cursed, the good and the bad.... Indeed, many of Jesus's parables seem to divide the world into two camps... the wheat and the tares, the wise and foolish virgins, the sheep and the goats, those who are welcomed and those who are banished. Read in this way, the question naturally follows, "In which group am I? And how about the others around me?" This tendency is deeply ingrained in human nature and is the root of all tribalism. It seems to be a fundamental need to know who belongs to our blessed tribe, and who can be righteously ejected.

However, if we interpret these readings from this different perspective of Love, blessedness and woe do not describe two different groups of people, but instead two different *ways of being*, resulting from a choice we are invited to make at every point in our lives between a love of Self which excludes God's love, and a love of Life which springs from God's love for us.

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This distinction is perhaps at the very heart of Paul's emphasis to the Corinthian Christians upon the resurrection of Jesus. We know from the biblical accounts that many converts in Paul's time came first to faith through a decision to change their lives, marked by the baptism of repentance of John. Perhaps some recognised that Jesus was a model of virtuous living, but that his death and resurrection was not necessary for their commitment to live virtuously. But for Paul, the resurrection of Christ is everything. Paul is regrettably too often read as someone who presents us with downright troubling lists of "dos and donts".

And yet for Paul, that art of living virtuously, and acting out of genuine love for another and all creation, is but an expected outward manifestation of the indwelling of the living Christ; it is "Christ in us" which comes first. Without Christ's resurrection we all are doomed because, despite our best intentions we all get things wrong, all the time.

To think we could live a perfectly virtuous life in our own strength is a delusion and, for Paul, a fatal error. For him, Christ's death and His resurrection to a new life which is accessible to us all, is the only means by which we can have access to the fullness of life, not just in the hereafter, but in the here and now.

And so, for Paul, life is also a life of binaries...but for him the binary is living in Christ and living in death. He recognises that each of us experiences that terrible pull towards making self-serving choices which ultimately lead us into that barren thirsty wilderness which he describes as death.

As we follow those self-serving drives, for achievement, wealth and comfort, personal happiness and fun, even for virtue, we may become rich, well fed, jovial, highly regarded. However, if we do so with an excessive focus on our small self, on the flourishing of our ego, in doing so, we may cut ourselves off from the way creative interconnectedness with each other and the whole of creation to which we are called, in Christ. This indeed is a cause for woe, as Jesus warned.

Beginning with Paul's mysterious encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, then through his ministry, a life of prayer in which he experienced poverty, hunger, sorrow and being hated and reviled, Paul developed a profound understanding of the resurrected Christ inhabiting him at his core

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and changing him. His sacrificial living for Christ became the source of his joy. "It is no longer "I" who live, but Christ lives in me" he declared.

Paul intuited that if he did anything that had true love at its root, then this was nothing to do with his own strength, but could only have come from Christ. In other words, if anything we do has lasting worth, then it has sprung from the Love of Christ dwelling in us. Anything else we do in our own strength alone, however splendid, skilful, glorious, acclaimed, is worth nothing. It is desolate, dry, dead; it is the uninhabited salt land of Jeremiah, or in Paul's words, a clanging cymbal.

And so, the challenge to us from these readings is not one of looking around to discern who is in and who is out. The challenge instead is one of looking inward, to recognise those parts of us which are hiding from the healing waters of the Holy Spirit of Christ, and which are parched and desolate. These are questions not only for us as individuals but for a body of people. A community... a family, a congregation, a nation... can easily become self-serving. This is all the more insidious because it comes all too naturally to support each other within our group in sharing an easy life, and colluding with each other in not considering the cost of that ease to others outside our group.

What it not always obvious is the extent to which this self-serving behaviour is harmful not only to others, but ultimately to ourselves. Both Jeremiah and Jesus declare that an ego-centred way of being is a way of desolation. Whilst the Bible often uses the language of God's judgement as punishment, actually this place of spiritual wilderness, the situation in which God's love for all creation cannot flourish, is one which we bring upon ourselves.

With God's help, in prayer, we can ask to be shown those ways by which we serve our own personal needs for security and power above the needs of the created world around us. When are those times when we choose to withdraw our roots from that life giving stream of Christ's love, and retreat to the wilderness of separation from others?

Let us pray that we open ourselves to the gentle prompting of his Spirit and so be led to those life-giving waters of Christ's love in which we can put down roots. May we be honest before God and ready for our mind to be tested and our heart searched so that the devious and perverse aspects of our nature,

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which Jeremiah recognised are in us all, are brought to light, and let us ask God for forgiveness.

And in recognising, in all humility, our own inner contradictions, the Good News is that we will then be able to recognise the same in others, and understand and forgive them also, knowing they are as mixed-up in the complex art of loving as we each are. True community is founded on bedrock of forgiveness for each other, a forgiveness which comes, as it did for Paul, from knowing Christ's forgiveness for ourselves and for all those times when we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, and have lost the way into participating in the life of Christ who dwells within us.

I will conclude by turning once again to the words of the collect for today, which you can find on your notice sheet.

Almighty God,
Who alone can bring order to the unruly wills
And passions of sinful humanity:
Give to your people grace so as to love what you command,
And to desire what you promise,
That, among the many changes of this world,
Our hearts may surely there be fixed,
Where true joys may be found.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who is alive and reigns with you
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever, **Amen.**