

6th Sunday of the Year

The way the Church's calendar and lectionary work means that quite often the readings set for 6th or 7th Sundays of the Year are omitted. St Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount has a sharper edge to it. St Matthew gives us the Beatitudes but St Luke counterbalances these with 'woes'. Jeremiah also contrasts the fate of the man who puts his trust in worldly things with the blessings that are in store for the man who trusts in the Lord.

Many people have the idea that religion is a comfortable set of beliefs which reinforces, or at least fits in comfortably, with society's values. Catholics through the centuries testify that this is untrue. In every continent and century, faithfulness to the Church and to the teaching of Christ has led people to be marginalised, disadvantaged, suspected, tortured and even put to death. In our own times, the Catholic moral stand on issues to do with the nature and value of human life brings us into conflict with the increasingly liberal trends in society.

The readings also challenge the idea that religion is an optional extra or some kind of consoling hobby. They show a clear choice to be made between following God's way and putting our faith in world's ways. To be happy and blessed, we must train ourselves to follow God's way. If we follow the world's way, our lives will be hollow, empty, and barren.

Hebrew writing liked to present pairs of opposites to the reader. The prophet Jeremiah sets the options before us in this way in our first reading. He puts the dangers of following the world's way in no uncertain terms: *A curse on the man who puts his trust in man, who relies on the things of the flesh.* Why a curse? Because once we start accepting the world's judgements and standards, a corrosive process has set in. If the world's view is easier than the Church's, we talk our way into compromise and acceptance. In the short run we enjoy an easy conscience and a good time. In the long run, we lose our Catholic conscience altogether and run the risk of separation from God. Jeremiah ponders only the effects of worldliness on a person in this life: *He is like dry scrub in the wastelands; if good comes he has no eyes for it.* Even more devastating would be eternal separation from God. Yet Jeremiah warns of this – he knows it is possible for people to become blind and deaf to God's call.

Saint Luke reveals an edge of steel in the teaching of Our Lord on the mountain. Jesus has declared the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the persecuted to be precious to God. He has reassured those who feel lost, hopeless and marginalised that they are already known to God and, in ways they may not yet realise, truly happy. They are offered a promise of eternal life and salvation: *"Your reward will be great in heaven."* But he also attacks head-on the idea that worldly success, wealth, power and popularity guarantee anything.

Our Lord does not condemn wealth, full stomachs or laughter in themselves. But He warns that we must not put our trust in any happiness they bring. Because worldly things bring worldly happiness they expose us to this risk of losing our true spiritual sight. A taste for human success can lead us to lose our appetite for heaven.

On the Sixth Day in the Genesis Creation story God creates human beings in his own image and likeness. Unlike the spiritual beings created before the beginning of time we have material bodies. Unlike the material beings created on the first five days we share in God's spiritual nature. This means we have an immortal soul and have eternal life with God as our promised inheritance. This is central to St Paul's message in our second reading. He tells the Corinthians that if there is no such thing as resurrection of the dead then our lives as Christians are based on a delusion. Jeremiah emphasises that we need to put our trust in the Lord as the source of true life and not in things of the flesh. In St Luke's Gospel Jesus contrasts the blessings of those who are poor in the things of this world with the fate of those who are content with material things. We do have material needs for we are flesh and blood – not pure spirit like the angels – but how seriously do we take the idea that the gifts of the Spirit matter more because unlike material goods they last for ever?

May we be like the tree beside the waterside, our roots thrust into the stream of God's grace, never ceasing to bear fruit. Aware that spiritually we are poor and hungry, may we be blessed by God now and for ever.