

Ordinary Sunday 6 – February 14th 2010
Jeremiah 17:5-8; Luke 6:17-26

Notes: Jeremiah 17:5-8:

- Our readings stand as a collection of wisdom saying in which Jeremiah offers a contrast between the ways of the righteous and the ways of the wicked.
- As we read we see the kinds of attitudes and behaviours that are acceptable as well as the kinds of thinking that go behind the behaviours.
- The word used in 17:5....*arm.* (in Jerusalem bible – relies on things of the flesh) is, in the Hebrew bible, a word used to describe God’s strength and power. A man of the covenant would rely on God’s strength and not on the strength of “mankind”.
- This reading is often read in parallel to Psalm 1 which is a psalm which also shows up the kind of contrast we have here: “where do men and women of faith put their faith and hope? Human strength? Divine strength?”
- Verses 5-6 show the ways of the unrighteous while verses 7-8 present the ways of the righteous.

Chapter 17 begins with Jeremiah proclaiming the judgment that is to fall on Judah and it is in verse 4 that the harshest words are to be found: *You will have to relinquish your heritage which I gave you; I will enslave you to your enemies in a country which you do not know, for my anger has kindled a fire that will burn for ever!* That is a tough proclamation. No wonder the priests and temple officials hated the prophet and tried to lock him away. But the question that is now asked by Jeremiah is: *Why is this judgment coming from God onto his own covenanted people?* Our text today answers that question while also giving us an alternative.

The kingdom of Judah is condemned because it has not been faithful to its religious processes and has chosen instead the ways of the nations around them. We are told that they have *made mortal flesh their strength*. That is the problem. As men and women of faith they had to trust in God but in their moments of stress and crisis, they turned instead to human ways of solving their problems. The ways of the flesh (politics, the law courts, finances, military might and fine speech making) seemed to be more attractive and more immediate and so they gave up their faith in Yahweh the God who had given them the land and who had covenanted himself to them. This is the sin of Judah.

This is why such a people are described as being like *dry scrub in the desert*. That place is painted as being a land of drought, of salt wastelands where the sun burns the earth and all that grows there. What kind of future can there be for a person who lives in that kind of world? And he provides a powerful insight when he observes that when a person chooses to live like that, when they rely on such human resolutions to their problems, when good actually comes in and offers them a way out of their mess, they cannot see it (*he has no eyes for it*).

The contrast is with the righteous man who places his trust in God, who surrenders himself to the will of God. God and God alone is the source of his hope. When he finds himself surrounded by enemies (whatever they may be though in this case it is the foreign armies) he turns to God and none other. It is because he trusts in God that

he will receive blessings and protection. In psalm 1 the person is described as being like a tree growing by the side of the river, producing lots and lots of fruit. Here the image is more active. The person who lives a life of trust and hope in God is like a tree who lives in a climate of drought but fears not the drought. Indeed, he thrusts his roots into the stream and has no fear of the heat of the desert. The heat can come but he continues to produce leaves and fruit. That is the great thing about this image. It is not about God ending the drought but in the midst of the drought encouraging the tree to send out its roots to his life giving water.

This is the point of contrast in the reading. The unrighteous man is like the scrub struggling to survive in the desert and being overcome by the drought. The righteous man is like tree who sends out his roots to the river (God) and survives and grows.

Thus it becomes a matter of choice in all of the human encounters in which we find ourselves living. The drought, the heat of the desert represents those things and they can be major events – sickness, death, unemployment, conflict, depression, domestic difficulties or possibly more minor, passing events: moments of uncertainty, loss of direction, an angry exchange, work place squabbles, etc. We all know what it is to find ourselves in dry, desert places. The message from God through the prophet Jeremiah is clear. We have to choose. We can seek to resolve our difficulties, fears, anxieties and challenges by pursuing human resolutions as our first and primary response, or we can begin by the ways mapped out for us by God. Is God our hope or when human support is gone or difficult do we slip into hopelessness? Is God like a stream running through our lives inviting us to send down our root system into his life and strength? Is God the one who provides us with cool leaves and abundant fruit or do we let him meander past on the periphery of what we do and how we live?

Luke 6:17-26

Notes:

- Jesus comes down from the mountain where he had chosen the twelve (17:17-19) and what we have in today's reading is attached to that calling.
- The crowd have come to hear him and to be cured. These are the two gifts that are on offer from God.
- In Matthew's sermon on the mount Jesus addresses the crowd and the disciples. Here in Luke he address his message to the disciples.
- Matthew has nine beatitudes while Luke has four.
- The poor here are not spiritualized but are the economically disadvantaged. They are also those who are marginalized among God's people.
- The mission of Jesus is shown to be preaching the Good news to the poor (4:43; 4:18).
- The hungry are those who are physically hungry. For Luke they are people who represent neglect and need. For Luke, the kingdom is about turning around the present difficult situations in which God's people are living.
- In the prophets those who are weeping are those associated with apostasy who are expressing their sorrow and are repenting. The weeping comes about because they have recognised their sins and are returning to God.
- The three terms for rejection: *hate you, set you aside, scorn you* are all signs of being marginalized by the wider community (or even within the faith community). These things come about because of their faithfulness to the Son

of Man and are presented as being inevitable: Kingdom living will make enemies and create difficulties.

- In the face of such persecution the disciples has a choice. They can trust in God to see them through and so remain faithful or they can give up on God solving their woes and follow human ways. Reward in heaven only comes for those who follow the path of faithfulness.
- Persecution of the prophets and the servants of God has been around as long as God has been calling people to serve him. In their time of woe they should take heart from the example of the prophets before them.
- The curses help bring out this contrast. The rich are cursed not because of wealth but because the wealth can be their foundation and they can easily become dependent on money instead of God. Money and possessions provide consolation rather than God

In today's Gospel we have Jesus setting out for the disciples his expectations for for life within the community of the messiah. People have gathered around Jesus the prophet for they have heard his wise sayings and more to the point, they have seen the power that has come out of him. The sick are made well and so they gather around him. Having come to hear the prophet Luke now has Jesus preaching his core message to them.

Like the reading from Jeremiah, Jesus is preaching a way of life that is built up around God and which acknowledges that in God men and women of faith will find a reversal of the conditions in which they find themselves living. The present realities of their lives are seen in a different perspective when they are explored from within a life of faith. While our hunger and thirst might seem to be overwhelming us, whatever hunger and thirst might mean for us at this moment in our lives, if we examine them from the perspective of living in God, then they will not seem so overpowering. Why is that? Because we trust and hope in God. The message is about starting points and ways of proceeding. It is not a message that promises a rose garden kind of life, where there are no problems, no pains and no struggles. It speaks of a Kingdom in which God provides hope of a way forward.

There is also a comforting message in the contrast with the situation of the rich and the powerful. They will eventually come tumbling down when their wealth and their positions of power prove to be unable to meet their deeper needs and yearnings. It is not about the evil of wealth but the dangers of building our lives and our plans on human endeavours and human successes. Eventually, what we build with our hands will no longer be enough and we will find ourselves like the shrub in the desert in the reading from Jeremiah: the sun will burn us, shrivel us and eventually leave us lifeless. Jesus offers an alternative: himself.

Here, at the beginning of the Gospel there is also a warning. The more faithful we are in living Kingdom values and in Kingdom ways, the more people will be critical of us. As Jesus says, they will hate you, marginalize you and call you all kinds of terrible things. Why is that? Because faithful living will only serve to make them aware that they have lost the plot and are building lives on human values. The ones doing the persecuting are more likely to be fellow believers than outsiders. While martyrdom is one consequence of faithfulness, the reality for Luke's Church (as we

know from stories in Paul and Acts) is that it is the internal squabbles that are more hurtful and harmful. Here he is explaining the reasons for this.

A disciple is the man or woman who lives out their lives according to the teachings of Jesus the prophet and messiah of God. His ways, his preaching and his power is what determines all that they do. What this requires is a turning around of the way we live. We are invited to ask ourselves the questions: What is it that makes our lives full? What makes us happy and contented? What is it that provides us with food and drink, that provides sustenance for the things we do and the way we think? Here, at the opening of the Gospel, Jesus is making it clear that he expects disciples to live a Kingdom way of life in everything they do, even when that living comes at a cost.

Conclusion:

It is clear from today's readings that being a disciples of Jesus means an active orientation of our lives to God. This means that everything we do has to be done in a "godly way". That there is God-dimension to all we do and that everything we undertake needs to be done in the light of the demands of Jesus. We often forget his and limit our discipleship to things we do in and around our church. That is not the Gospel way.

Jesus came down from calling the disciples and then he makes it clear: you are being called to live in a particular way and that particular way is going to be spelled out in particular ways in the rest of chapter 6. Discipleship is about how we live with God and how we live with each other. These are tough asks but as the prophetic images show us, God is like a cool stream running through our lives, inviting us to send down our roots into his depths so that he can feed us, strengthen us and give us life, even in the midst of the hottest of droughts.