

Message for February 13, 2022

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Luke 6:20-26

It has been said that slowly but surely Canadian society is becoming 'coarser'. What people mean by this is that swearing and profanity are becoming ever more common and an ever more acceptable part of day to day life. There is probably some truth to this as all we have to do is think of some of the language that we hear on TV, in movies and especially perhaps on social media. It has been claimed that swearing is a natural part of Anglo-Saxon society but, be this as it may, swearing is not common in all societies. In fact there are some societies such as Gaelic Scotland and Ireland where swearing is actually rather rare. What they do in place of swearing however is even worse; they curse.

We may sometimes think that swearing and cursing are one and the same thing, but they aren't. When a person swears, they utter an expletive or vulgarity but that is generally the end of it. To utter a curse however is to actually wish harm on another person. To use an example, suppose you are driving along and another driver cuts you off. In a moment of anger you may swear at the other driver but then that is usually the end of it. Suppose however that in the same circumstances you were to say something like, "And I hope that within sight of your destination you have three flat tires!", and you really mean it. Which is worse; the swear words or the curse? In days gone by many people believed that curses had power and, depending upon who uttered them, curses might even come true. For this reason curses were not uttered lightly but when they were, they generally filled the people who heard them with fear. The power of a curse in fact is one of the things that made people in days gone by so very uncomfortable with today's New Testament passage; indeed they found it both shocking and disturbing in a way that perhaps we don't.

This morning's New Testament passage is the beginning of Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain". This is a great sermon and yet it has always lived in the shadow of Jesus' other great sermon, the "Sermon on the Mount", and it's certainly not hard to see why. Like the "Sermon on the Mount", the "Sermon on the Plain" also begins with a list of beatitudes or blessings:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude and insult you, and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man.”

So far so good and if Jesus had stopped there then the “Sermon on the Plain” would probably be as well-known and as appealing as the “Sermon on the Mount”. In this particular sermon though, Jesus did not stop there since he followed the blessings with a number of warnings or curses.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.”

This is a lot less warm and comforting; in fact this list of woes or curses is harsh and even frightening. As one author has written of them: “They are spoken in an electric atmosphere. They are not quiet stars but flashes of lightening followed by a thunder of surprise and angerment.”

Truly it is no wonder that most of us much prefer the “Sermon on the Mount” over the “Sermon on the Plain” and many of us find it rather shocking that Jesus would even say such things! Even so, Jesus’ words in today’s passage are firmly rooted in Biblical tradition. In today’s first scripture passage for example, Jeremiah had his own list of blessings and curses. The blessed, said Jeremiah, are those who put their trust in God and live for him; they are like a tree that is planted by a stream. No matter what ever happens that tree will thrive. The cursed on the other hand are those who put all of their trust in others and their possessions. Such people said Jeremiah, are like a bush in the desert which cannot and will not thrive.

In short, said Jeremiah, God gives his people, and that includes us, a choice. We can put our trust in God and live for him and his ways which also includes living for others or, if we prefer, we can put all of our faith in ourselves and live for ourselves alone. The first way is the way of blessing, and the other is the way of curse. One is the way of life and the other is the way of death, spiritual death. The choice is ours but, said both Jeremiah and Jesus, choose wisely and choose well.

The way of blessing appeals to that which is best in all of us. It is a cold heart indeed that is not stirred by the notion of doing what is right, pleasing God and helping others. We admire people who do these things, and we may even call them saints! One of the reasons we call these people saints is because we know how hard it is to live like this. Human nature being what it is, it is hard to share, to care, to give of ourselves, and to sacrifice for the sake of both God and others. Human nature being what it is, we often think that our happiness, contentment and even security itself lies in what we have, and preferably having even more. We think that only if we had more of this or that, whatever this or that may be, then we'd be happy and content; then we would be truly blessed! And yet, as we all well know, even if we don't always want to admit it, all the wealth and possessions in the world can't make us truly happy. Rather, our happiness, joy and contentment are to be found elsewhere. They are to be found in relationships, in having the right relationship with both God and others. At a deep fundamental level we know this, and yet it's so hard to let go. In a way we are like members of the tragic Franklin expedition.

In 1845 the Franklin expedition left England for our Canadian north and its goal was to find the elusive North-West Passage. The expedition however seemed to be doomed from the start and all we have to do is consider what was packed on board the two ships. There was a twelve-hundred volume library, expensive chinaware, crystal goblets, and even sterling silverware for the officers with their initials engraved on the handles. Each ship however only had a twelve day's supply of coal for the auxiliary steam engines. The ships became trapped in the ice and several months later Lord Franklin died. After that the rest of the men went their separate ways in small groups seeking safety, but none survived. The story of two of the officers though is instructive. They dragged a large sled for more than sixty-five miles and later, when their bodies were found, it was discovered that the sled didn't contain life-saving food or blankets, instead it contained a heavy load of table silver.

Now in a sense this can be a parable about us. So often so many of us go through life dragging the table silver behind us so to speak. But that table silver, as beautiful and as valuable as it may be, cannot and will not give us life. Our happiness, peace and contentment do not come from what we have. Rather they come from living the way God wants us to, and that is by having the right relationship with both him and others.

A noted English writer of days gone by, Malcolm Muggeridge, wrote his autobiography which is entitled "The Green Stick". Looking back at his long and very eventful life, he wrote:

"All I can claim to have learnt from the years I have spent in this world is that the only true happiness is love, which is attained by giving, not receiving."

These are words of wisdom born out of experience and they echo both of today's scripture passages. Naturally we prefer the "Sermon on the Mount" with its comforting list of beatitudes rather than the "Sermon on the Plain" including as it does, its woes and curses. The "Sermon on the Plain" though, as harsh as it may sound, reminds us that God gives us a very basic choice in life. We can live our lives focusing solely on ourselves, but if we wish to be truly blessed and experience joy, peace, and contentment, then we know what our choice should be.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer. On this day before Valentine's Day, we give you thanks for everyone whom we love and who loves us, whether they be with us or you. We thank you for our families, our friends and everyone else who have and still do touch our lives for the better.

We thank you for all the other ways that love comes into our lives, and especially for your love as it has been made known to us through Christ. We thank you for his life, teaching, example, death and resurrection, and the life that he has made possible for us, now and forever.

We thank you too that such is your love that you set us free to choose how we will live our lives. Help us we pray to choose wisely and well, and grant that in all things we may be a blessing in the lives of the people around us and in the world beyond.

We pray this day for all who have made unwise choices in life, bringing harm to themselves, their loved ones, and others.

We pray this day for all who do not feel blessed, but rather the exact opposite.

We pray this day for all who lack so much including food to eat, warm clothing, and a place to call home.

We pray for all those who are struggling to cope with the ongoing stresses of the pandemic; those who are worried about their lives, the lives of others, their own livelihoods and that of others. We pray for wisdom for all in positions of authority as they try to chart the way forward amidst the protests and the growing social divisions. We especially remember the people of Ottawa, and those too whose lives and jobs have been impacted by the blockades at the border.

As the fear and tension continues to grow in Ukraine, we pray for the well-being of the people of that land. As the world's attention is focused on that troubled region, we remember as well the people of Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa, faced as they are with the very real prospect of starvation.

May your blessing we pray, be over everyone, everything, everywhere.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen