

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 6 Year C 2022

In an utterly timeless way, the Gospel reading placed before us today once more reminds of the way the Lord Christ turns our world upside down. And, it again highlights how the gospel continues to speak to the condition – to the hearts and lives - of modern men and women. To those who argue, *'The bible is irrelevant, the bible has nothing to say to me, this Jesus fellow, yeah, he seems ok, but I just don't get any of it,'* we could just say, *'here, read this'*, and pass on the text we have just heard. What makes this passage today so timeless and compelling is that it addresses the key ailments of the human heart. Those things which so easily and readily derail most of us, are here addressed front and centre, but with such simplicity. Sometimes just naming the problem is the biggest step toward healing. Take the next step, and acknowledge them before God, then they can also be moments of grace.

'Blessed are the poor' we hear. We might be more familiar of the rendering of the same idea from Matthew's Gospel, *'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'* But there is none of that softening here. Instead, just a simple and straightforward statement of the blessedness of being poor. On the face of it we might see this simply as a glorification of economic poverty. And that certainly is within the bounds of an acceptable interpretation of this text. But it can leave us with the problem of thinking that if we are not really economically poor, then it doesn't actually have anything to say to us...

Instead, we might propose a reading which says, *'blessed are those who are not addicted to material things.'* And I would suggest that cuts a little closer to home for most of us. One of the classic substitutes for God is material wealth and the accumulating of things. Like any drug, any addictive substance, money, houses, cars, clothes, gadgets, provide a rush, a certain kind of thrill, when first acquired. But in time the thrill wears off, and more of the drug is needed. And this continues inexorably and tragically until the addict is broken by it. It's not at all uncommon for those – and you probably know such people - who on the surface appear to have 'made it', to have all of the biggest and the best, who have the latest and the hottest but are completely miserable! If we are not careful, the forces about us can direct us to living a life *completely* given over to the accumulation and maintenance of stuff. And education, friendships, our personal, social and professional lives, circle and serve that addictive and finally insatiable desire. The result is to crash into misery. How blessed indeed, then, are those who are free from these attachments!

Our Lord goes on, *'Blessed are you who weep now.'* Again, we might be struck by a certain kind of oddness, even craziness at this claim: 'how fortunate you are if you display the outward signs of anxiety, grief and depression...' But perhaps we might think of it instead as, *'How fortunate you are if you are not addicted to good feelings.'* We live in a culture that puts a premium on good feelings, and attempts to deny or medicate away anything that suggests you are less than happy. And if you doubt the status of happiness in our society, look how fiercely it is defended. *Nothing* is supposed to stand in the way of your personal happiness. Not the good of society, not the stability of family life, not the wisdom of the ages, not social institutions and certainly not the church. When loved ones sometimes make strange life choices, the default position now is to shrug the shoulders and say, *'oh well, as long as they are happy...'* Abandon wife and children, well as long as they are happy. Children can mutilate their bodies, but as long as they are happy. All the opportunities and promises of life can be whittled away, but as long as they are happy. And the virtues which truly enrich a life - duty, fidelity, service, loyalty, sacrifice - must give way to the demanding hunger of the idol of happiness. The ruinous results of such a mindset are all around us, and are surely what lay at the heart of our culture of decadence and moral weakness.

In itself, happiness is only an emotional state, a fleeting and insubstantial condition. It cannot possibly satisfy the deepest yearnings of the soul. And yet it is sought with as much compulsive frenzy as any other drug. Again, we feel the rush and pleasure and then, when the thrill fades, we try at all costs to reproduce it at a higher pitch. And this is exactly where the addictive use of drugs and alcohol and the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure in sex and food, are to be understood. An easy, but ultimately life-destroying, path to happiness. How blessed, then, are those who are free from these attachments.

And then, *'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man.'* And what could be stranger than this!? No one wishes to be hated, excluded and reviled. But to reframe it as, *'Blessed are you if you are not addicted to the approval of others'* may be of more help. Status, attention, fame are among the most powerful and insidious of the false gods, and they have a terrifying grip. And in the age of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and the rest even more so! Each time we receive a word of praise, or get a 'like' on our social media, or get noticed by others for what we have done, again, it is like the rush of a drug. There is a thrill, but it quickly passes. But the mental health of generation depends on this.

Our Lord challenges us in the gospel today, *‘Woe to you when people speak well of you.’* Winston Churchill said, *‘Never trust a man who has no enemies.’* It is a sure truth of the Christian faith that we must be willing to risk the disapproval of others. If we are never convinced enough of the truth of the gospel that we are not willing to make sacrifices for it - if we are unwilling to make a stand for it at *personal cost* - then the gospel of Christ *has not* taken hold of us! The person whom everybody loves, who has no enemies and never makes a stand, has made the approval of the crowd their idol. But as so many of the saints - and of course Jesus himself - shows, true spiritual freedom brings us inevitably into conflict with those who do not believe! But as we know, and only too well, the approval of the fickle crowd waxes and wanes. How blessed indeed, then, those who are free from that attachment.

In John 8 Our Lord declares, *‘you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’* Part of the truth that Christ comes to reveal is that chasing after all the old gods of approval, fame, status, of happiness, of pleasure and self-satisfied contentment, of possessions and money are dangerous and destructive. They can never be the path to fulfillment and abundance of life. Serve them and they will only enslave us. C.S. Lewis rightly argued that when a disordered affection is allowed to become a god, it becomes a demon. They are dangerous and will ultimately destroy us. But Christ comes to set us free. The life of blessedness - true blessedness - comes when we accept the true freedom he brings.

Saint John of the Cross - the towering spiritual figure from 16th century Spain - wrote, *‘to reach satisfaction in all, desire satisfaction in nothing.; to come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing; to arrive at being all, desire to be nothing.’* Desiring to possess, to be all, desiring to have everything and be the centre of everything, well that is only the path to addiction. But desiring to possess nothing, desiring to be nothing, is instead freedom and the path to life! Then we can see the world as it truly is and not the distorting lens of possessiveness and egotism.

The first thing that Christians want to say about humankind in the light of our faith is that *we are made for God*. Wealth and possessions, self-satisfaction, happiness, adulation and approval are poor and dangerous substitutes. The invitation of the Lord Christ is to allow our lives to be lived on a much wider horizon, in fact the widest horizon there is. Allow him to cut us free from those bonds which only diminish and impoverish us, and we will be free indeed. Amen.