



## **Two Ways of Living** **Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26** **Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (February 13, 2022)**

The UN's World Food Programme has issued a warning that many in the Horn of Africa are at risk of starvation. The raining season has failed three years in a row. Imogene Faulks of BBC News reports that "Crops are ruined, livestock are dying, and 13 million people in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya are going hungry. Food prices are rising, and with little to harvest, demand for agricultural labour is falling, increasing the pressure on families trying to feed themselves."<sup>1</sup>

If you add on top of that the conflict in Ethiopia and the covid pandemic, you may easily imagine the catastrophic challenges people are facing.

Today's gospel passage follows a night spent in prayer on the mountain (Luke 6:12). At daybreak, Jesus calls his disciples closer and chooses twelve of them and names them apostles (v. 13). A disciple is one who follows the teachings of a master. An apostle is a disciple the master sends to pass on a message.

Soon after the selection of the twelve, Jesus with all the disciples comes down from the mountain and joins a large multitude of people who has come to see him from the surrounding areas in an attempt to learn and absorb healing power from him. To them, Jesus delivers one of the greatest and most challenging speeches recorded in the Bible: the message on the Beatitudes.

One would think that a message on divine blessings would be uplifting, and it is. It is also scary and hard to take in.

Jesus seems to be saying: "If you are poor, hungry, or weeping now; if you are hated, excluded, and slandered things are going to get better. You will be blessed. But if you are rich, full, and laughing; if you are respected and others speak well of you then look out. Woe to you. You are going to lose it all and get the opposite of what you have."

I have the same reaction many of you might be having: my stomach is all tied up in knots. I wonder what his disciples heard him say and what they made of his divisive words. Couldn't he keep his mouth shut and just be one happy family? I also wonder what his mother Mary thought: Did Jesus need to be that extreme? No compromising middle ground?

You see, I really like the first part of the beatitudes, the part with the blessings. I find myself there any time my heart aches at the troubles of the world, any time I grieve with you when you experience a debilitating illness or have a loss in the family.

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<sup>1</sup> [Africa Live: Mauritius sends team to UK-owned disputed islands - BBC News](#)

But I am shocked and worried about the second part, the one with the woes. I know I am not poor, and I have meals three times a day. I struggle at night when I know I sleep in a bed and have a roof over my head which protects me from cold nights and rain.

I think of those who sleep in the woods or in the back of stores under pieces of cardboard. I wonder what brought them there: Unhealthy choices? Misfortune? Mental health issues? Joblessness? Lack of education? Gender issues? Domestic abuse?

There we have it: something really serious to worry about. Jesus' words are not easy to digest.

He sounds pretty set in his view of the world. He sees on one side those whom society shames as inferior and undesirable. They are the ones who weep and are desolate, suffer hunger, alienation, discrimination, and injustices of all sorts. The poor are not only those economically disadvantaged. They are the ones who because of physical or societal status, like the lame, the blind, the mentally ill, do not have a seat of honor at society's table. Even a rich widow was considered "poor" because she had limited legal appeal and could easily be taken advantage of. All those "poor" have no power to influence others and whose company is looked at as less than desirable. They are less than human in the "rich" people's eyes.

On the other side, Jesus sees those who consider themselves the cream of society and have it made, those who seek power, pleasures, honor, and fame, those who enjoy powerful connections, those who have nothing to fear from life.<sup>2</sup>

But Jesus has simply come to fulfil what John the Baptist, borrowing from the prophet Isaiah, had announced:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low."<sup>3</sup>

Mary had also foretold it in her powerful poem we call the Magnificat (Luke 1):

<sup>51</sup> [Yahweh] has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

In today's story, Jesus comes down from the mountain to a level field to give a plain talk about God's view of the world. Those who are high will be brought low. Those who are last will be first. God has a heart for the socially vulnerable and those who struggle in this life.<sup>4</sup> Jesus has come to level society. God's blessing rests on those who have absolutely nothing to fall back on

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 400-401.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:4-5

<sup>4</sup> Luke 16

in this world. If we want to know where God's heart is, we must look to the world's most reviled, wretched, shamed, and desperate people. They are the fortunate ones.<sup>5</sup>

In Jesus' times, an honorable person was interested only in what was rightfully his and would have no desire to gain anything more. Doing so would mean to take from another person. The ancient Mediterranean attitude was that every rich person is either unjust or the heir of an unjust person. To be labeled "rich" was therefore a social and moral statement as much as an economic one. Power procured wealth. In our times, though, wealth buys power. We can do much with wealth accumulated through honest labor; we may have comforts in life and care for those less fortunate.

So, possessions and a comfortable life are not the issue here. The Bible tells us money is not a problem per se; love of many is.<sup>6</sup> The question is, do we possess things or do things possess us?

The difference between those who receive blessings and those who receive woes is not about what or how much one has. One may have much and yet be very poor and, vice versa, one may have nothing and yet be rich.

The difference is an openness and willingness to live for something beyond this world. Jesus, in a way, picks up where Jeremiah (ch. 17) left off:

<sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals...<sup>6</sup>They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. <sup>7</sup>Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. <sup>8</sup>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. Where did you plant your roots? What or Who gives you hope?

If we are comfortable, satisfied, and secure, what causes us to be so? Where do we put our trust? In other words, where is our heart? Where is our treasure?

Woes are promised to those who are comfortable, satisfied, and secure not because of the amount of wealth accumulated, or the number of meals in a day, or the happiness experienced in a week but because of one's self-containment and self-satisfaction.

Jesus doesn't offer four blessings to one audience, and four woes to another. His sermon is not a sorting exercise between the good and the bad folks; he addresses every blessing and every woe to every person, as if to say: this is the human struggle; this is what it means to become human. Temptations in life try to take us away from our humanity and Jesus, the one who has lived the truest and most complete expression of humanity (the "It is finished"?), has opened a way for us.

This seems to be our struggle in the process of becoming human: We move back and forth between blessing and woe. We invite blessing every time we find ourselves empty and yearning for God, and we incur woe every time we fall into prideful and thoughtless self-satisfaction.

When I am "full" of anything but God, I cannot let God in; so, God "empties" me. Not as punishment, but as grace. Because it's when I am emptied that God can fill me; it's when I am vulnerable that God can make me strong. When I am filled with anything but God, I deprive

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25 also tells us it is in them we may find Jesus.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10; Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 6:24; Ecclesiastes 5:10.

myself of the peace that comes from being in God's presence and my roots are not sinking into the waters of God's abundant grace.

Our God is a God of both comfort and challenge, and in the divine economy, we are, all of us, on one level. Blessed and woeful. Saint and sinner.

When our heart aches, let us turn to God in confidence. We will find comfort and contentment in God's grace. When we notice pride and arrogance, let us turn to God in contrition who is slow to anger and abundant in mercy.<sup>7</sup> That too is grace, undeserved, abundant, and free. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 103:8; 86:5 and many more.