

February 16th, Proper 6

Opening Prayer:

Almighty and ever-living God,
you root those who trust in you
by streams of living and healing waters.
Release us from the bondage to falsehood
Free us from the power of evil.
Turn us from the illusion of wealth for security
that we might find in you
the blessing of new life we seek.
We ask this through the healing power of Jesus Christ,
your Son, our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and ever.

Jeremiah 17:5-8: *God, through the prophet Jeremiah, contrasted the fates of the godly and the ungodly. The ungodly have purposely turned away from God; they trusted (or “believed”) in humankind’s power and strength alone. On the other hand, the godly truly trust in God. The ungodly are compared to a shrub that dies in the desert, while the godly are like a tree planted near a stream which gives it life. Perhaps an excellent analogy for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives!*

Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

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.

1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20: *Paul continued his argument that Christians will be resurrected bodily with Christ (the “first fruit”). Paul’s argument is that Christ’s death on the cross took away our sins when the Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice and raised him on the third day. So, we too, who are in Christ, will be raised with Christ.*

If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

Luke 6:17-26: *We hear Luke’s version of the beatitudes in which he asserted that we are blessed by God by being included in the kingdom of God and not necessarily with material possessions. In Luke’s version the poor are those who know their need of God and desire to know God through Jesus; the rich can’t be bothered with such “nonsense.”*

Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

‘Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Like the early disciples, we too are on a journey of following Jesus. We too are called. We too are dedicated, holy, set apart. Because this one called us, we find that we are becoming more and more like him. More loving. Less “judgy.” More accepting of others. Less condemning of people.

Sure Jesus is perfect and we are not. Yet in Jesus we find we are perfected, not by our doing, not by our religious activities or righteous deeds, and certainly not by our good works but by Jesus’ good work alone on the cross.

Like those first ones called, we too learn to set aside our agendas as we find we are more and more wrapped up in God’s agenda, about which we hear in this morning’s Gospel reading.

Jesus’ words give us a glimpse into another realm, another commonwealth, another kingdom, where the conventional wisdom of the world is turned upside down, or maybe it’s better to say that the conventional wisdom of the world is turned upside right.

Those who know what it’s like to depend only on God are blessed – no matter how rich or poor they are, no matter how happy or sad life is, no matter what people think of them.

It is because we know how poor and hungry we would be without Jesus that we bless those poor and hungry in our midst. It is because of how God has forgiven us that we turn the other cheek and give even our shirt as well as our coat to those who ask of us.

It is because God first loved us when we were at best ambivalent to God, and at worst enemies of God, that we love others, especially those who are difficult! It is because Jesus gave up his status and privilege to be with us that we refrain from demanding special rights and privileges from one other. “My will be done, or I’m outta here” becomes “Thy will be done, no matter the cost to me.”

This is radical living – and there is healing in it. Healing from the damage that the world inflicts upon us when it says that only the rich are blessed by God, only those whose lives are filled with laughter all the time are blessed, and that only those who never know hunger are blessed by God. The world tries to form us into thinking that only those who live lives of ease are blessed, that only those who never have to worry about how the bills will be paid are blessed. They even have good health and good looks, for crying out loud!

We live in between these two realities, these two systems, these two kingdoms if you will. We live in both the eternal kingdom of God and the temporal kingdoms of this world. "Live for God's kingdom," Jesus is saying to his followers. When we do, all the other cares of life, no matter how sad or sorrowful, seem somehow to be lightened.

When Jesus' followers live this way, this place becomes a place of transformation. Somehow, when we gather for worship it's as if we're transported to another place, another realm, another kingdom, one in which all are welcome, where those with plenty bless those with less.

See, it's not just the bread and wine that get changed, the Body of Christ gets changed too, from a bunch of individuals into a community, a Church, that lives for God alone and strives for, seeks God's kingdom, above all else.

The world says that the more you have, the more blessed by God you are. The easier your life is, the more blessed by God you are. That when you have no worries in life, that that is when, and only when, God is blessing you.

The right side up wisdom of the kingdom of God, with a cross standing in the midst of it, says that right when life is darkest, most desperate, when all the money in the world can't save you, when all of your friends, and it seems even God, have abandoned you, that Jesus Christ is right there to bless you and to save you.

This is God's agenda, after all, whose Christ said that all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and that the last shall be first and the first shall be last in the kingdom of God. It sounds impossible, and it is impossible, until we remember that this is God's agenda, and with God, all things are possible.

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Concluding Prayers

Blessed are you, O Lord our God. In Jesus you have made the cursed shrub of desolation to be our tree of life. Cut us away from trust in ourselves, and water our parched and withered hearts with the streams of your love.

O God, you brought life out of death through the Red Sea waters and through the death and resurrection of our Lord. We pray for Charles, our king, and the all that world's leaders that you would call all the peoples of the world out of futile living and believing, that we all may hope in your dominion of justice and peace.

Holy One, in Jesus you touched the troubled and unclean. Reach out and touch all who are troubled. Remove the evil spirit of racism. Let your power cleanse us that we may sing praises to you alone.

Gracious Lord, your mercy encompasses all creation. Stretch out your gracious hand even as we deny and distort your presence in our midst. Fill us with the hunger which makes us dependent on you alone. May our lives extend your healing hand to all the world..

Lord, from creation to covenant and from prophets to present day, you have judged those who seek consolation in their possessions. Bless us with the poverty which opens us to your dominion. Call us away from a life which hoards and squanders your creation.

Abba God, you came to us little and vulnerable. Make us see and become one with the poor that we may share in your dominion. Make us see and become one with the hungry that we may find our satisfaction in serving others.

O God who alone can satisfy our deepest hungers and thirsts,
protect us from the lure of power and wealth;
stir up our hearts to seek first your dominion,
that we might know the joy and security
of those who place their trust in you alone.
We ask this through your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God forever and ever.

For our Parish.

O GOD the Holy Ghost, Sanctifier of the faithful:
Sanctify this parish by thine abiding presence
especially at this time when some feel they cannot gather together.
Enlighten the minds of thy people more and more
with the light of the everlasting Gospel.
Bring erring souls to the knowledge of God our Saviour;
and those who are walking in the way of life,
keep steadfast unto the end.

Give patience to the sick and afflicted,
and renew them in body and soul.
Guard from forgetfulness of thee those who are strong and prosperous.
Increase in us thy manifold gifts of grace,
and make us all to be fruitful in good works;
O blessed Spirit, whom with the Father and the Son together
we worship and glorify, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

THE peace of God, which passeth all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord:
And the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you
always. *Amen*