

**Sixth Sunday After The Epiphany – February 11, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
Luke 6:17-26 – Blessings & Woes**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

[To the best of my knowledge, there is no canonical requirement for the preacher to be honest about how he or she arrived at the day's sermon. But because I think a pulpit is a place for truth, I'll tell you that I was sorely tempted this morning to preach the sermon I had prepared for Sunday before last, when the snow kept Gail and me from getting to Hinton. And I may yet, some day, do so, because there are some thoughts in that sermon which I think need to be expressed, but not today.

The reason is that,] as I read through the lessons for this morning, I was struck, and I mean forcefully impressed, with their focus on "blessings."

We use the expression "bless you" routinely in conversation.

Someone sneezes, and "bless you" is heard from around the corner.

If you go to confession, you begin by saying "Bless me, father, for I have sinned." At the end of today's service, Father Adeeb will bless us with words like "the blessing of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – be upon you and remain with you."

And in recent memory, it is rare for a president of the United States to end a speech to the nation without saying something like "God bless you and God bless the United States of America."

We have brought these words forward from Scripture, but what meaning have we brought with them? What does it mean, in our world, to say “God bless you?”

It is in the context of that question, which I admit is something that has long been on my mind, that I read today’s lessons.

The prophet Jeremiah, author of the longest book in the Bible, gives us a vivid picture of the differences of the lives of those who rely on God and of those who rely on themselves. He does it basically by quoting Psalm One, which is also part of today’s readings. In Luke’s Gospel, we read the section known as “the beatitudes,” the statements that begin “blessed are...”.

And Paul is the one who ties it all together in the Letter to the Church at Corinth. We’ll come back to that, because I’m not sure it’s immediately clear. Let’s stipulate, though, that the Old Testament lesson, the Psalm, and the Gospel are all focused on the difference between being and not being “blessed” – whatever that means.

It’s important to understand the world view of Jeremiah, of the Psalmist, of Paul and of Jesus himself. In terms of “blessings and curses,” “Scriptures testify to a traditional world in which divine powers (principally the God of Israel, but also “the sons of God, ” “Satan, ” “the queen of heaven, ” and others) are believed to influence, directly and indirectly, the life and destiny of nations and individuals. The course of human events is experienced as neither accidental nor self-directed but as dependent, wholly or in part, on the will of these divine powers. In this setting, blessing and curse, deriving ultimately from the disposition and ability of

the gods to further or thwart the “good life,” are of crucial importance to human welfare.”¹

I wonder if we fully accept that world view in our own lives as Christians? I suspect that we do not, and if we do not, then we really don’t quite understand what is going on in today’s readings and what God is saying to us.

In the Bible’s world view, everything good comes from God, and these good things are all blessings. We receive these blessings by aligning ourselves and our lives with God’s intentions for us, and in return, as part of the covenant God has made with his people, we and our lives are blessed by God.

To be “blessed,” you see, is, in the words of one definition, “the happy comfort of those who revere the Lord and do his will.”²

In Thomas Ken’s words to the Doxology, when we sing “praise God from whom all blessings flow,³” we acknowledge that “all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,”⁴ to quote a Thanksgiving hymn. We use these words all the time. In the current idiom, we “talk the talk,” but do we “walk the walk”?

Luke’s Gospel says some people are not in right alignment with God. They include the rich, whom he describes as having received their consolation; and those who are well fed, saying that there will come a time when they will be hungry.⁵

¹Freedman, David Noel: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York : Doubleday, 1996, c1992, S. 1:755

² NIV Study Bible, footnote to Psalm 1 p 787. Zondervan Publishing.

³ Hymn 380 “From all that dwell below the skies.” Stanza 3 words by Thomas Ken; music *Old 100th*, The Hymnal 1982, Church Publishing Incorporated, New York.

⁴ Hymn 291 “We plow the fields and scatter.” Words by Matthias Claudius; music by Johann Abraham Peter Schultze. Ibid.

⁵ Luke 6:23-24.

Luke is speaking in spiritual terms, but he sees the spiritual as inherently part of our lives. Another way of saying that, is that some of us have chosen to rely on ourselves. We look at our lives, and see that we have enough money, enough food, a roof over our heads, and we conclude that we must be good people, for look how God has blessed us.

That approach puts us and our supposed skills before God and his gifts. We see what we think we have done, pat ourselves on the back, and, like Little Jack Horner, “stick in a thumb, pull out a plum, and say what a good boy am I.” But when we rely on ourselves, we’re not good at all, because we’re missing the whole point of being God’s people.

You know, we people are fragile. We catch cold, break bones, eventually we die. For what purpose do we live our lives? If not for the sake of God, then for what purpose is anything that we do? If not for God, who gives us life, everything is futile.

This is where I find Paul’s letter this morning so helpful. It is typical Pauline writing – convoluted and hard to comprehend, but when you work your way through it, you arrive at Paul’s wonderful testimony to the power of the Risen Lord and you realize that Jesus Christ is indeed raised from the dead, and because of that, we will never die.

Because of God’s love for us in his son Jesus, our lives have meaning.

Because Jesus’ body was broken for us on the cross and his blood shed for us, we can be fed at the Lord’s Table. Listen for the moment when Father Adeeb will hold up the bread and the wine, offerings we have just given to God, which God transforms and returns to us as “the gifts of God for the people of God,” and

[he] may add, “take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on them in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.”⁶

We do nothing good without the grace of God, but with that gift, we are powerful instruments of his message.

The good news for today is that God is in charge of our lives, and has arranged things so that all will be well. We have nothing to fear if we put our trust in God to lead us in the right way.

If we decide to do things without inviting God into the equation, we will fail. I don't expect that for this congregation. I think you will continue to look out for one another, loving your neighbor as yourself, and giving thanks to God for all that he has given to you.

A few weeks ago, I was in a small church⁷ near Pittsburgh, and the people there reminded me in many ways of this church. Homestead and Hinton, as communities, have much in common; their original economic reasons for being are gone. At each service, the Homestead church offers a “prayer for the parish,” and I'd like to offer that prayer to you. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, you have banished all fear through the resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ. Grant us the courage to overcome all our fears. Help us to risk ourselves for others. And strengthen our ministry to those in need, that we may be your faithful witnesses in this community. We ask for the sake of your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

⁶ Holy Eucharist Rite II, Book of Common Prayer (1979), pp 364-5. Church Publishing Incorporated, New York.

⁷ St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Homestead.