

SIXTH SUNDAY

(Four sermons)

JESUS SEES THINGS DIFFERENTLY FROM THE WORLD

Lk. 6:17, 20-26

The world has its own way of looking at life. If you follow Christ then you have to look at life another way. This is seen in the Gospel reading for today. Jesus takes such things as poverty and riches, tears and laughter, rejection and acceptance - and contradicts the way the world looks at them. He pronounces blessings on poverty, tears and persecution. These words of Jesus sound strange and ridiculous to our world because it places such a premium on riches, pleasure and popularity.

What is Jesus saying to us? He is not setting up a moral system in which money, fun and friends are always vices; and that poverty, sorrow and persecution are always virtues. That would be foolish. Jesus knows human nature so well that He knows how money, pleasure and public opinion can harm us. It is possible to be poor because we are lazy, sad because we are selfish, feel persecuted because we are paranoid. Jesus is not suggesting that sort of sick society. He is simply looking at life differently from the world and encouraging His followers to do the same.

Let us consider first the subject of money and riches. Jesus pronounced blessings upon the poor and issued a stern warning to the rich. He was not denigrating money. He knew the necessity of money and the things that money can buy. But He knew something else about money - that it can be a danger to our physical and spiritual wellbeing. Instead of us controlling the use of money, it can control us.

A tale from Aesop's fable can shed some light on this subject. There was once a dog that managed to find a juicy hunk of meat. He thought he would go to his hiding place and eat it in peace. But first he had to cross a stream. Looking into the water he saw another dog - with a much juicier hunk of meat in its mouth. He opened his jaws to get it and, in trying to get what he did not have, lost what he had.

Instead of being content with what we have of this world's goods and using them as a means of living our lives at peace with God, we can easily become obsessed with the need for more ... bigger houses with more bedrooms than we need; faster cars even though there is a 70mph speed limit; more holidays overseas although we claim to be concerned about global warming; weekly extravagant meals despite being overweight or shopping for more clothes or shoes that we will rarely wear. Such behaviour shows we are not content with what we have. We must always have more. That is what Jesus meant when He said, "How happy are you who are poor: but alas you who are rich." Jesus was simply showing how we can be grasping and possessive. Money in itself is neither good nor bad. It all depends on what we do with it - and what we allow it to do to us.

Next, Jesus confronts us with a new view of laughter and tears. "Happy you who weep now: you shall laugh. Alas for you who laugh now: you shall mourn and weep." Jesus is not encouraging us to go around with long faces and sour dispositions! It is true that He is called the "Man of Sorrows". But I am confident that in His lifetime He was known more for His happy disposition than His tears. His Apostles would certainly not be attracted to a miserable person. So, what did He mean by blessing those who weep and a woe on those who laugh? He was simply contradicting the idea that the whole purpose of life is to have a good time - the 'eat, drink and be merry' mentality that thinks only of self and forgets others. Jesus is saying there is more to life than that. This world of ours confronts us with some very sad and tragic things. All around us there are people who are hurting, lonely and afraid. Our sole purpose in life is not to think only of our own pleasure but to care about

others. Once we start doing that, we will learn to weep with those who weep. It is then that we shall appreciate laughter for we have learned how to care and weep for the sorrows of others. If we can forget about ourselves and learn to care about others, we are going to cry and laugh with them.

Finally, we need to change our view of social acceptance. "Happy are you when people hate you...on account of the Son of Man. Alas for you when the world speaks well of you!" Jesus has not lost sight of the fact that everyone likes to be liked. He is simply saying that we must not live our lives for the fickle acclaim of public opinion. Nothing enslaves a person more than a consuming passion to be popular with everyone all the time. That is impossible anyway, for nobody can please everyone. And while you are trying to do it, you are compromising your personal integrity - until you end up not liking yourself. So, Jesus is warning us not to fritter away the treasure of our self-respect while chasing the rainbow of public applause. Jesus never checked the winds of public opinion before He made up His mind or determined His course of action. He is saying, 'Be like Me. Do it My way. You will know some rejection and even persecution, but at least you will be your own person and be walking in the proud company of prophets who were persecuted for proclaiming the truth.'

Lord Jesus, we need to realise that living our Christian life is like buying a new pair of spectacles. They are not rose tinted but they allow us to focus better on the things that really matter. They will allow us to see money laughter and popularity as You do. Then, we will be truly blessed and we hope You will reward us with Heaven.

A RECIPE FOR HAPPINESS

Lk. 6:17-26

Do you want to be happy? Of course, you do! But are you certain as to how this can be achieved? Jesus has the answer in today's Gospel. Let us reflect on the words that Jesus used and His suggestion that many of us are not finding happiness - because we are looking for it in the wrong places.

Firstly, we need to recognise that what we really should be seeking is not temporary happiness, but long-term blessedness. Jesus begins with a list of conditions to describe blessedness or lasting happiness. We should not be seeking the fleeting emotion of giddiness nor laughter, nor the euphoria we associate with happiness. For such emotions are fleeting. Our definition of happiness is usually tied to external circumstances. Some of these are trivial. Did our favourite sports team win or will we receive the invitation to the dance by that good-looking boy or that attractive girl in sixth form?

That is not the kind of happiness that Jesus offers us. His is real happiness. He calls us to be blessed, not just happy. Blessedness is long-term well-being and not tied to external circumstances. In fact, it seems to thrive in the face of adversity. Listen to the list of those who experience this blessedness in the sermon of Jesus - the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the unpopular. Does that sound like a line-up of happy folks to you? Yet, Jesus dares to turn our conventional wisdom on its head, suggesting that blessedness survives such devastating life circumstances because it does not draw its source from the things that happen to us. Blessedness draws its source from the God who offers it.

Do you want to live a life of joy and contentment that is consistent through the ever-changing conditions of life? If the answer is yes, then seek the happiness that God can offer you. Rest in His word that you are blessed in Him. Tie your sense of peace and security and self-esteem in His desire to call you blessed, not in the performance of the stock market or your social calendar. For if you are settled in your relationship with God, and draw your life-force from Him, you will find that those other factors gradually lose their power over you.

Secondly, realize that blessedness is a gift, not a reward. You do not possess it; it possesses you. Did you notice the language of Jesus in our lesson? He does not present blessedness as a hidden treasure that we must find. He offers blessedness as a gift from God, for those who open their hands and hearts to receive it. It is not a trophy to be won. Blessedness is not available for those who think that it can be garnered by hard work or aggressive behaviour. In fact, such thinking probably has the opposite result, blocking the path to receiving the blessedness God intends for us.

If we think happiness is found in expensive houses, fast cars, abundant food, constant entertainment and a full social calendar, we may have little need for God should those ambitions be achieved. These things can be accomplished by hard work and social skill, but they may leave little scope for an awareness God - the only source of true happiness in this life and the only One Who can carry us to blessedness after our lives are through. That is why Jesus said the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the unpopular are closer to blessedness. All they have to offer God is their emptiness, not their fullness.

All God asks of any of us is that we come to Him with openness and willingness to receive His graces and to serve Him in return. Sometimes the poor, the hungry, the grieving and the outcast can find that openness easier than those of us who have managed to take care of ourselves in the affairs of this world.

If you are used to being in charge, it may be difficult for you to come to God as a little one, with need for God to carry you. If you are full from life's bounty of money and food, it may be difficult for you to discover the spiritual hunger for the gifts of God that you could never afford nor deserve. If you are popular, it may be difficult for you to be willing to sacrifice that popularity if your faith demands it. Jesus offers the only path to true happiness. He asks us to carve out enough empty space in our souls to receive the gift of blessedness, and having received it, to arrange our lives around the sure knowledge that we are God's blessed children.

Lord Jesus, may we stop searching for material wealth and earthly happiness, and be content to rest in our heavenly Father's blessedness. It is then that we will find that true happiness we have been seeking so hard to find has been looking for us all along.

WE ALL WANT HAPPINESS

Lk. 6:17-26

Do we want to be really happy? Then today's Gospel will teach us how to achieve this. Jesus suggests that many of us are not finding happiness because we are looking in the wrong places. And we are looking for the wrong thing.

Jesus begins His sermon with a list of conditions to describe happiness. And we need to understand is that for Jesus happiness is not a fleeting emotion of laughter and euphoria. Such happiness is usually tied to external circumstances ... is our favourite sports team winning its latest match, have we received an invitation to next month's big social event, or can I sink this birdie putt into the hole. Such happiness, of course, does not last.

How can we find something more meaningful? Jesus has the answer. He gives us the recipe of lasting happiness. He tells us this is not tied to external circumstances. In fact, it seems to thrive in the face of adversity which, to our modern ears, seems to be contradictory. For according to Him it is the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the unpopular who are the happy ones. Does that sound like a line-up of happy people? Jesus has turned our conventional wisdom on its head!

He maintains that happiness does not depend on external circumstances but on the happiness that God offers us. We will only find lasting happiness in Him. Once we tie our

sense of peace, security and self-esteem with His desire to make us happy, and not in the accumulation of wealth or popularity, then we will find that material things gradually lose their hold over us.

To be really happy, we must realise that happiness is a gift of God and not a reward for our everyday labours. You do not possess it; it possesses you. Jesus did not present happiness as a hidden treasure we must find. He offers happiness as a gift to those who open their hands and hearts to receive it. Happiness is not available for those who think it can be gained just by hard work. In fact, such thinking blocks the path to receiving the happiness God intends for us. If we think happiness is found in an accumulation of riches, abundant food, constant entertainment and a full social calendar, then we will find that we have little need for God if we have all these things. They can be acquired by hard work, social skills and good fortune. They leave little room, therefore, for dependence on God, the source of happiness in this world and the next. That is why Jesus said the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the unpopular are the happy ones. All they have to do is to offer to God their emptiness, not their fullness. Now it is only God Who can make them rich; only God Who can satisfy their hunger; only God Who can comfort them and make them popular.

If we are used to running our own lives, it may be difficult to come to God as a little one, with the need for Him to carry us. If we are rich, it is difficult to have a spiritual hunger for the gifts of God. If we are popular, it may be difficult to sacrifice our popularity if our faith demands it.

Lord Jesus, You are the only One Who can lead us, along the path of lasting happiness. Help us to unclutter our lives to receive the gift of Your happiness and so become Your Father's happy children. Let us stop our quest for temporary happiness, but search for that lasting happiness which only You can give.

WHAT ARE OUR TRUE VALUES?

Jer. 17:5-8 & Lk. 6:17,20-26

The term optical illusion refers to an image which appears to come from a real object, but in fact does not. It bears the semblance of reality, but the image is no more than an imagination. To pursue an illusion with the intention of grabbing hold of it will be a futile exercise, leaving us with a sense of being frustrated and disillusioned.

The choices we make in our daily life reflect our deep-seated attitudes and values. And today's readings invite us to look carefully at what they are. To put it starkly, do we place our trust in God and live by His values, or do we place our trust in this transient world and live according to its dictates? The root of the problem is the confusion between reality and illusion: each is mistaken for the other.

What society often portrays as reality is nothing more than humanity's desires to satisfy our feelings and urges even though they are here today and gone tomorrow. Conversely, our belief in God and commitment to His teaching, which is what really matters, is often dismissed by nonbelievers as a figment of the imagination. For example, as the key to enjoying life the Times Supplement advocated that the two most important New Year resolutions were to sort our finances and to reduce our stress. That was the key to enjoying life. But are they? Time will highlight the difference between the illusion and the reality. The Lord warns us not to be taken in by this falsehood, but to put our trust in Him, Who alone can fulfil our hearts' desires.

In the corresponding text from Saint Matthew, Jesus goes up the mountain. But in today's Gospel by Saint Luke He comes down the mountain to teach the people on the plain. For Luke's portrait of Jesus, emphasis the fact that the Son of God came down from Heaven to

Earth and shared the condition of lowly people, experiencing poverty, hunger, sadness and rejection. The Lord therefore sides preferentially with those who are suffering and in need.

Luke's version of the beatitudes includes a blessing and a curse. Those who put their trust in the Lord, Who is the ultimate reality, are blessed even in the midst of their hardships. On the other hand, those who live by the illusory values of materialism and secularism are courting disaster. They are the most stupid and unfortunate of all people!

The blessings and curses are explained in terms of life after death. The future state is contrasted with the present, since God will have the last word. This means that what is now enjoyed as a reality will be found to be a transient illusion, and what is now endured as a transient suffering will bring the reality of eternal happiness. Once again God turns the values of the world upside down.

Four specific materialistic values are emphasised for condemnation. When we seek to be rich and accumulate wealth beyond our needs, we are trusting in money rather than in God. Excessive indulgence of our physical appetites for food and drink is another expression of apostasy because this is the worship of the god of the belly. A life given over to the pursuit of pleasure, through the indulgence of our emotional and sexual appetites, as promoted by our secular culture means we are rejecting God's exhortations to keep His commandments. And the desire for popularity and fame, even if it means compromising our Christian principles, is another temptation favoured by modern culture. By contrast, blessed are those who not only forgo popularity, but even suffer persecution for the sake of Christ.

Lord Jesus, Your message is very clear. Our needs are minimal, but our wants can be excessive. Secular culture seeks to exploit our appetites by making us want things far beyond our needs. If we really trust our heavenly Father, He will provide what is necessary for our spiritual good, and we should be content with less of this world's trappings. We will then be truly blessed and our reward will be great in Heaven with Him, You and the Holy Spirit.