

February 13, 2022 Epiphany VI Year C

In Jeremiah we have graphic contrast between those who trust in God and those who trust in “mere mortals” and make flesh their strength. Jeremiah compares those who trust in themselves to a shrub in the desert. They live in a dry wilderness of the soul and cannot anticipate relief. Their hearts turn away from God.

On the other hand, those who live in a trusting relationship with God are compared to a tree planted by a never failing source of water. These people continually bear the fruit of their relationship with God. They do not become anxious when drought comes because they trust their source to sustain them.

From my experience, I’m not so sure that these two groups of people are mutually exclusive. I find myself in both these places. To quote the father of the epileptic boy in the Gospel “I believe, help my unbelief”. Why is this so?

Jeremiah is on to something about human nature. He says “the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse. Who can understand it?” Clearly something is amiss with human nature and Jeremiah has put his finger on it.

To quote Goethe: “He took the suffering human race, He read each weakness clear; and stuck his finger on the place and said thou ailest here and here”.

For Jeremiah all places lead to one place: the central defection of the human heart. Jeremiah’s insight prefigures that of Augustine. It actually sounds modern.

Indeed who can understand the human heart? We barely understand ourselves. The last sentence is most important. “I, the Lord test the mind and search the heart to give to all according to the fruit of their doings”. It takes God to understand our inner selves. He alone can heal our inner contradictions.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians goes right to the heart of the Christian faith. Apparently, there were some in the Church at Corinth who did not believe in resurrection of the dead. They did believe in the immortality of the soul but not of the body. They were Greeks and considered the body to be the prison-house of the soul. The body was matter – the source of all evil. They believed that when one died the body went back to the elements of which it was made and the immortal soul became part of the Divine. Immortality required getting rid of the body.

Paul goes to great lengths to defend the resurrection of the body and the soul – the whole person. He goes round in circles. If the dead – body and soul – are not raised from the dead then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised then Paul’s testimony is in vain and their faith is in vain, and those who died in Christ have perished. How pathetic is that?

In the Christian faith the body is not considered evil. Christ consecrated the body by his incarnation. He became fully human as well as fully divine. He did not come to us as a disembodied spirit but as a whole person. After his resurrection he showed his body to his disciples – scars and all.

Barclay writes “the Christian belief is that after death, individuality will survive, that individual remains”.

Paul says that our resurrected body will not be like our present body. Personally I would like to be taller and thinner. It will be a spiritual body: our personality will survive.

What does this mean for us? It means that God desires us to be whole persons now and in the future. He loves us so much that he wants us to be around forever.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is not speaking to the crowd but to his disciples. He is teaching them the choice between the world’s values and the values of the Kingdom of God. It is a great reversal. We start out with those who are blessed: the poor, the hungry, those who weep now and those who are misunderstood, insulted and defamed because they follow Jesus. They are blessed because the Kingdom of God belongs to people like these.

According to the New Interpreters Bible, “The blessing of the poor neither idealized nor glorifies poverty”. It declares God’s prejudicial commitment to the poor...One of the principal hallmarks of the Kingdom will be the redemption of the poor. Read the Prophets and you will find similar statements, Jesus speaking good news to the poor, laughter and joy among the oppressed will characterize the Kingdom.

But for the rich, the self-satisfied, the smug and callous the Kingdom of God will bring woes. The woes announce God’s judgement. The rich have already received their reward. The rich who ignore the beggar at their gate will find in the next life they will have none of the abundance they had in this one. They are victims of false security.

So what does God require of us who are not poor, if we wish to participate in God’s Kingdom? I think of Zacchaeus who gave back money to those he had cheated. I think of Bill and Melinda Gates and their Charitable Foundation. I think of our work in the inner city and our support of the Good Shepard Home in Cameroon.

God wants us to have genuine dependence on him, not on wealth, nor on any privileges of our own. As Theresa of Avila says “God alone suffices”.