

February 16, 2025 – Revd Wim Kuiper
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Readings: Jer 17.5-10, Ps 1, Luke 6.17-26

Who are the goodies and who are the baddies? In a lot of fairy tales, books, TV series and movies it is immediately clear who is the hero and who is the villain. Black is black and white is white. But it gets more interesting and to be fair, also more realistic, when we see some more nuance in the main characters. The hero is perhaps a good person indeed, but may also have some major flaws and weaknesses. The villain may get some more sympathy, when we understand that he or she has been a victim of wrongdoings in the past. A victim making victims, that unfortunately happens a lot. And there is always the possibility that the evildoer shows remorse and turns around, which gives even a more happy ending.

In the Bible we find a lot of such more interesting, nuanced characters. Take for instance the stories of king Saul and his rival and successor king David. But there are other Bible passages in which a clear, dualistic, black versus white view is given. Making a sharp distinction between those who are cursed and those who are blessed. The prophets in the Hebrew Bible are very good at that. A clear example is today's passage from Jeremiah. There is good and there is evil. Some people choose to do good and others choose to do evil, and this is a choice with a consequence. The evil ones are cursed and the good ones are blessed by God. It always makes me wonder what is happening with all those who are somewhere in between, somewhat less consistently staying on either side. I am probably not the only one who feels slightly uncomfortable with this image of God putting everyone firmly in one of two categories, and rewarding each person according to what their deeds deserve and eventually heaven or hell. I can see though, why this might be helpful to get the attention of the listeners. To use such a powerful rhetorical device to bring across the important message that the listeners should indeed turn from evil to good. To help them to reflect on their wrong ways and to turn around. Live a faithful life and act in an honest and charitable way. Becoming like the abundant fruit tree that God hopes them to be, in stead of a bush in the waste lands, or becoming like chaff which the wind blows away (using the words of Psalm 1, which is equally dualistic). For those who are suffering from evildoers such words may also bring some comfort. There will be some kind of justice done in the end, even if it does not seem to be in the here and now. And this is an important function of this kind of prophetic speech as well. Something you and I can still very much appreciate, looking at all the prosperous and powerful evildoers in our present day world.

In today's Gospel passage from Luke, we see Jesus standing in that same Jewish, prophetic tradition. He sometimes uses the same way of convincing his listeners to make the right choice in how to live their lives. And perhaps even more importantly, to give comfort to his present and future followers, many of whom will tick these boxes Jesus mentions of the category of those who are blessed, exactly because of the fact that they choose to follow him. And so, unlike the sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel in which he mentions only those who are blessed, in this less popular sermon on the plain, we hear of four blessings, but also get these four woes. And what perhaps is even more upsetting to hear is that it is not so much the evildoers who are getting all these woes, but simply those who are rich and well fed, jolly and well-spoken off by others. Whereas Jesus calls blessed those who are poor, hungry, weeping, hated and excluded because they follow him.

You may have heard of a certain branch of Christianity called 'prosperity gospel'. It tells us that if you follow Jesus in the right way, you will get all kinds of earthly rewards by Godly intervention. The flipside of this theology is that when you are getting a disease or losing your job and therefore

getting poor, or whatever other kind of misfortune, this must be caused by a lack of faith. Could it be that Jesus is warning here against such kinds of superstition? Unfortunately, there is no guarantee for worldly rewards for those who follow Jesus. Instead, through the centuries and until this day, many good Christians have been excluded and outright persecuted because of their faith. But there is still every reason for Jesus to call them blessed. We are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus in order to live a different kind of life. By doing so, we will become more and more, as a tree planted by water, with our roots by the stream, which is our Lord Jesus Christ, therefore not fearing the heat and the drought and not ceasing to bear the fruits of the Spirit. Constantly feeling blessed by God and being a blessing for others.

And, as always, reading a passage from the Gospel that at first sight is not so easy or clear, or even upsetting, we should read around it as well. We will find out that Jesus gives us also these further important lessons. Firstly that we should love our enemies and do good to those that hate us. And secondly, that we are not to judge and condemn others. We should leave that final judgement, all these kind of categorisations of those who are good or evil, blessed or cursed, rewarded or punished, to God only. These two lessons are an integral part of this sermon on the plain of Jesus.

So this morning, Jesus provides us with some challenging words about what our discipleship might mean. He also shows us that a good life according to worldly standards may be much less fruitful, less blessed, than it seems to be. But he also calls us not to judge others and to continue to love, even our enemies. And to stand with Jesus in that Biblical prophetic tradition of criticizing the often cruel ways of the world towards the poor and hungry, towards those who are depressed and all who are hated and excluded. They are dear to God in a special way, and should therefore be particularly dear to us as well. Amen