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UWI Anglican Service

(Spoken at The United Theological Centre in Papine, Kingston, Jamaica)

Feb. 13, 2022, Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Jeremiah 17:5-10 and Luke 6:17-26

In our first reading we heard the words of the prophet Jeremiah that will open the door for us to hear the words of Jesus today. Jeremiah was one of those “true prophets” that Jesus speaks about in our gospel reading. He lived at a time of crisis nearly 600 years before Jesus’ birth and he experienced the downfall of his own country, the kingdom of Judah. The words that we heard from him today were part of a lament that he wrote when he was imprisoned for exposing to his people the inevitability of the catastrophe that they were living through as the Babylonian empire chipped away at their land, their freedom, and their lives. When in desperation the king of Judah made alliances with the neighboring countries to defend themselves against attack by the approaching military might of Babylonia, Jeremiah said, “Cursed are those who make mere flesh their strength,” as we heard in the reading. These alliances will not save us, he said, because they are merely mortal. We will be conquered. But know this, too, Jeremiah said to his people, although the Babylonian empire will have its way for now, it also is merely mortal and will not last.

Jeremiah was one of those brave, clear-eyed people who see things as they really are and do not turn away, no matter how horrible the situation is, how many tears it causes them to shed, or how much hatred it earns them. As Jesus was talking to his disciples and a large crowd in our reading from Luke’s gospel, he calls people like Jeremiah, those who are poor, hungry, weeping and hated, the blessed. It is not the way that most people normally understand the word “blessed”. Rather, that word is usually applied to people who are rich, full, laughing, and well-spoken of, those for whom Jesus laments by groaning out, “Woe to them”.

Why does Jesus mourn over us and others who are experiencing what we consider blessing and why does he rejoice over us and others who are experiencing what we consider misery? Why does he make this uncomfortable reversal? There is something inside me that doesn’t want to be blessed if it means crying and being hated, struggling financially and not

having enough to eat. I would rather have Jesus grieve for me because I am happy, well fed and loved.

Jesus is here giving me a reality check and issuing a warning because, like Jeremiah, Jesus is clear-eyed and brave. He says to us, “When everything in your life is running smoothly and you are prospering, your heart rests on all the created things that are serving you well. But created things are not God. Every created thing has a beginning and an end so that no created thing can sustain your life completely, in every way, and without end. Every created thing, no matter how good, strong and beautiful it is, is limited and will fail you at some point, and in that day you will be traumatized.” Perhaps it is a timely warning for the day before St. Valentine’s Day, when the air waves are full of songs in which the singers tell their loved ones, “I can’t live without you; my life is tied to yours.” I once read the confession of a dying man who feared that his death would devastate his wife, to whom he had been married for decades. So, one day when she came to see him in the hospital, he asked her to forgive him not only for whatever wrong he had done during their marriage but also for the fact that he was leaving her and his death would throw her life into turmoil and he would not be there to help and comfort her because he would have died and there was nothing he could do anymore to prevent it. “Forgive me,” he said, “forgive my dying.”

Probably each of us here has experienced such a day of collapse, when we lose our consolation, find ourselves hungry, and mourn and weep. On such occasions we often feel that God is absent or is somehow against us and not on our side, and our lives seem to have lost any purpose or future. After all, scriptural passages like Psalm 1, which we read earlier, compare those over whom God is watching to trees planted by the water. “Their leaves do not wither” it says, and “in all that they do, they prosper.”

Sitting in the waterless cistern where he had been thrown, Jeremiah recalls this Psalm as he writes the lament that we heard from him, but he puts a little twist on it; it is just a little twist, but it is very significant. He adds that these trees planted by the water “shall not fear *when the heat comes*” and “*in the year of drought* they are not anxious, and they do not cease to bear fruit.” Even to those trees planted by the water, days of heat and drought come. They come, as Jeremiah, the faithful prophet, attests from his own experience as he was writing those words in the dark.

At those times those trees planted by the water have only one source of life left to them; everything else is gone. In those moments their trust is the Lord only and there is nothing else, and God is most mightily at work in the dark. From the first lines of the scriptures to the last, there is a strong affirmation of faith that God works to bring life to the world precisely when it is dark and there is nothing else but the true God. God created the earth when it was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Later, when Jeremiah's people went into exile in the land of their conquerors, the prophet Ezekiel tells us that God left the temple in Jerusalem to go with the people into exile to make them prosper as captives in a foreign land, and finally to bring them home. In our gospel reading from Luke we see Jesus coming down to be on a level with a crowd of sick and desperate people in order to heal them. When Jesus himself has been killed and placed in a tomb, the Holy Spirit is there in that very dark and lifeless place to raise him from there to unending life and joy. Therefore, if we are experiencing a season of drought, sitting in the darkness, suffering poverty, hunger, or grief, and being despised, it is a sure sign that God is planting us with Jesus Christ near the water of life that flows endlessly from the throne of God so that our lives continue bearing fruit even when we think it cannot be possible.

It is then that Jesus stops grieving over us and calls us blessed because we have been disillusioned and now we see and know the pain of the world that so many around us experience daily, and in the midst of that pain Jesus comes to us to go through it with us and to speak words of promise for us and for all those who have been stung by the harsh reality of the world and who are grieving, disillusioned and disappointed. Jesus promises to give us the reign of God, in which the eternal and unbounded God sustains life beyond the boundaries that sin, pain, and death have placed on it. He gives us his own Holy Spirit, whose specific work it is to bring us into this alternate reality by linking Jesus' life with ours and taking us through Jesus' cross to his resurrection so that a new life can begin to grow in us and bear fruit. That is what happened for all those people who came to Jesus because they were sick and troubled. Our gospel text says that when Jesus came down to a level place, a crowd of people from all over gathered to hear him and to be cured by touching him since, in that connection, power came out from him and the Holy Spirit went to work in them, giving them healing and new life.

We are like those people. Martin Luther once said that the church is a hospital for sinners. So here we are at St. Sinners' Hospital. Whichever room of this hospital you enter, whether it is the emergency room, the intensive care unit, the convalescent section, the COVID ward, or the

morgue, you leave this hospital alive and forgiven, with fresh breath and hope. Here at St. Sinners' Hospital even today you will touch the body of Jesus and hear that it was given for you as what Paul calls the "first fruits" of our salvation with more to come. For this reason, the Eastern Orthodox tradition refers to the Eucharist as the "medicine of immortality".

In these days of adjusting to the hard reality of COVID, we hear a lot about the need to pivot, which means to re-orient ourselves to new ways of doing things. I find those adjustments burdensome and it helps me to put them in perspective by trying to make them serve the really great pivot that God is making in our lives as God carries us from the reigning spirits of our time to the reign of God, from ignorance to wisdom, from sin to righteousness, from disease to health, from despair to hope, from tears to laughter, from pointlessness to fruitfulness, from isolation to community, from paralysis to action, in sum, from death to life. The Holy Spirit is constantly twirling us around in this way because 180-degree pivoting is a dance move that God loves to make in our lives.

Trust in this God and this life-giving work allows us to see all good created things caught up and saved from their weakness and mortality and brought into the reign of God with us through Jesus. Then they become for us not objects, people, powers or relationships to which to cling as if they could save us, which they cannot do. But instead, we know that we and they together have a Savior already, and it is Jesus Christ. When we are drawing our life from Jesus, like trees planted by the water, then we no longer try to draw our life from other things or people and then we can really love them and do good to them for their own sakes, which is what the Bible means when it speaks of bearing good fruit. So, as you go through this week, in your work and play, in your laughter and tears, perhaps in celebrating St. Valentine's Day with the one you love, in whatever you do, you have the assurance that the Holy Spirit is bearing fruit in your life for the care and preservation of the world around you as a witness to the reign of God in which we live.

Let us pray: Living God, in Christ you make all things new. Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your glory, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.