

Sunday 6

Many of us may have early memories of ourselves in a classroom situation. There we are in the seventh or eighth grade, and we see the teacher (for some of us a nun in her black habit with her rosary beads hanging at her side) coming down the aisle to help those who are having problems with the assignment. Where does she stop? It is not at the desk of John Crosby who always knows all the answers and appears to have supernatural knowledge. No, she stops at the desks of those who have difficulties with the assignment. They are the ones who need help. And we remember that now and then we were among that number.

We needed help then, and some of us may also need help today in understanding today's gospel. Because of our familiarity with the Scriptures, we may not be shocked at its message. But can you imagine someone who is not familiar with our scriptures happening upon today's gospel. What would this person think? Would he or she not think: "Can this text really be correct? Can Jesus really have said this? Can Jesus really have believed that the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated are blessed, are happy, are the people in the world who should be congratulated? Everyone knows that all these situations are horrible, are precisely the

conditions which sane people try to avoid. No one wants to be poor or hungry or sad or hated. We all want to have enough of the world's good to be able to enjoy life. We all want to have enough to eat. We all want to laugh, not cry. We all want to have friends and be loved, and not hated." And so this person unfamiliar with our scriptures would turn to us for an explanation. Could we, can we, give one? Indeed, don't we sometimes feel a contradiction in our lives, for while we claim to be Christians, we do not want to be poor, hungry, sad and hated. So we do not accept our leader's words. We are living a contradiction. Our actual lives do not conform to our master's words here. We do not want to be called blessed or happy because we are poor, hungry, suffering and hated. We do not wish to be congratulated for being in such situations.

Here is an attempt to remove this contradiction. As this passage is given us in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is addressing his disciples. There is a larger crowd present, but he is concentrating on those who have already committed themselves to him. Then, in addressing them, he recognizes the situation or condition in which they find themselves. They are in fact poor, hungry, sad and even at times hated. And now he promises them that one day their situation will change. One day you will be rich, one day you will be full, one day you will be happy, one day you will be loved.

And why does Jesus promise them this reversal of fortune?

Because of his understanding of God, of his Father. God is like the teacher in grade school. She does not stop at the desks of those who do not need help. No, she stops at the desks of those who are not doing well, who are unable to complete the assignment, who need her help. So is God, Jesus tells us.

At first you might say: No, that is not correct. That is not how Jesus portrays his Father. The Father is more even-handed. He stops at everyone's desk, for, as Jesus tells us, "He makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust." So his care is all-inclusive. But, that granted, isn't the additional picture Jesus gives us of his Father one that tells us that he seeks out those who need help. He himself, the Son, comes performing miracles for the deaf, the lame, the sorrowing, the hungry. He comes especially for these people. Those are the desks at which he spends more time because those who are the people who need more help. Indeed, as Jesus taught, God will leave a flock of sheep to seek out one lost lamb. Therefore, the poor, the hungry, the sad, the hated are blessed and happy and to be congratulated precisely because God bends over them with infinite love and care. God has stopped at their desks.

This interpretation of today's Gospel stresses the time element: the disciples who are now poor, hungry, weeping and hated, will one day in the future experience a reversal of fortunes, for God will come to their rescue. But is there no help now for them now? Does God wait until the next life to help them? No. God's help comes to them in their misery here and now in two ways. First, their fellow disciples must come to their aid. If they do not, then their lives and their beliefs have not come together. They are living a contradiction. They are not following the actions of the Lord Jesus who sought out the suffering. Secondly, the Lord Jesus makes known his presence to his disciples in their suffering. That this is the case is confirmed by those who suffer. They will tell us that the Lord is with them in their hour of need. They feel His presence as He stops at their desks.

Our first reading today from Jeremiah confirms this belief when it tells us that those who trust in the Lord are like a tree planted beside water, while those who trust in themselves are like a barren bush in the desert. Today's responsorial psalm repeats that message. Those who follow the Lord are like a tree planted near running water, but those who rely on their own strength and pursue wicked way are like chaff which the wind drives away.

We as a church are at this moment among those whom the world despises for the abuse of children by our priests and the failure of bishops to have prevented it. We must now rely on the Lord to stop at our desk and help us. God will do that. The Lord Jesus will do that provided we do not tell him that we do not need his help. We have to admit that we do need help. We have to trust in Him and not ourselves. Only then, according to Jeremiah and our psalm today, will we be like a tree planted near running water. Only then will we, in imitation of the Lord, turn to others in need.