

THE EMMAUS SERIES

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Jeremiah 17:5-8

1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20

Luke 6: 20-26)

How happy are you who are poor.

This gospel passage (and its parallel, Matthew 5:1-11) has great importance for those who claim to be followers of Jesus. It brings his answer to the question: Where am I to find true happiness? – the ultimate concern, surely, in all our striving. Happiness – which is often confused in people's minds with the superficial contentment we call "a good time" – will only be found in the things that meet our deepest needs as persons. And, in the end, only the things of God that will fill the "depths" that are in every human person (John Paul II). As the world's true Saviour, Jesus shows us how we can fill these depths – all that he stood for as he shared our life shows us the way to true happiness, even in this present life; and he promises to share with us his own happiness in the life to come. In today's gospel he points out the way to those who want to be his true followers.

Note how Luke sets the scene. The audience addressed by Jesus is made up of two groups, "a large gathering of his disciples" (those who have made a commitment to what Jesus stands for), and "a great crowd of people from all parts" (those who are drawn to him, but hesitate to commit themselves more fully). Jesus "fixes his eyes" on the first group, and addresses his teaching concerning true happiness to them. Note, however, that in the scene as Luke describes it there is no hard boundary dividing the two groups. Though the words of Jesus are addressed to the first group, they are also an invitation to those in the second group to find the joy that will be theirs if they take his paradoxical invitation seriously. And, because our Christian communities have always contained these two groups, Luke is inviting us to ask ourselves where we stand.

"How happy are you who are poor". Jesus' teaching on true happiness – to be continued, we should note, in next week's reading – overturns the assumptions of worldly wisdom. In Matthew we find a different wording: "Blessed (with true happiness) are the poor in spirit". There is a subtle difference in what the two evangelists wish to convey of the teaching of Jesus. Luke does not canonise a state of material deprivation - in what follows, as we shall see, Jesus urges those who have material resources to use them with a generosity learned from their heavenly Father: what Matthew calls being "poor in spirit". But it must also be recognised that Luke is calling to mind a fundamental biblical theme: those who are materially poor are privileged, not because they are morally superior, but because they are the object of God's special concern: "God hears the cry of the poor". Those who have learned to trust in this truth have found great blessings – whether their deprivation has been imposed on them by circumstance, or they have embraced a life of poverty that is voluntary, in imitation of the Saviour's own life.

In our pursuit of happiness, God respects our freedom. As the first reading reminds us, the outcome depends the choices that shape our lives. Jesus contrasts true happiness with the "woes" of an empty life. Perhaps we can see in today's troubled world "a fulfilment of the woes Jesus directed against a rich, abundant, laughing, self-congratulating social order" (Paul Tillich).

John Thornhill sm