

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time C - Sermon on the Plain — ‘*Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, weep; and when people hate you, exclude you, revile you, and defame you.*’
February 13, 2022.

Happy Valentine’s Day on Monday. Tuesday is the 15th day of the first month in the Lunar calendar year, the first full moon. It is the Lantern Festival and is the Chinese Valentine’s Day. It is said that back in the old days, when women were barely able to leave the house, Lantern Festival was a day they could go out to light up lanterns, to meet people and hopefully their future lovers.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, consider your condition in life. Are you relatively secure financially with an abundance of material possessions? Do you eat out in expensive restaurants? Do you have a comfortable home? Are you well thought of in your church, office, neighbourhoods, and community? Probably the answer for the majority of us to these questions is “Yes. Now, consider others in your community and the world, are any of them poor, hungry, grieving, hated, excluded, reviled? Of course, we all know people like that and consider them extremely unfortunate. At least that is the common view. But fantasize for a moment. Imagine your bishop gathering the unfortunates of your diocese and telling them: **“Are you ever lucky! How blessed you are to have such poverty and grief and misery in your lives.”** Most of us would think the bishop had gone crazy. Such a conclusion, however, must take into account the message of this Sunday’s gospel reading Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17, 20-26) and its parallel, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-11, Sermon on the Mount.

Both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain lay the groundwork for the new Christian church. The sermons’ messages are timeless and eternal for all Christians and seekers. The overall message of the Sermon on the Plain is for Christians to follow Christ’s example of performing kind, generous actions to the less fortunate in this life. The content of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount works to reform the spiritual attitudes of Christians. One major difference between the two sermons is the Sermon on the Mount has five more beatitudes than the Sermon on the Plain. The additional beatitudes in [Matthew 5:5-9](#) bless the meek, those who *thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers*. These beatitudes address the spiritual nature of people long ago and today.

In the Sermon on the Plain (Luke), Jesus is inviting us to ask ourselves where we stand. **‘How happy are you who are poor’.** Jesus’ teaching on true happiness. In Sermon on the Mount (Matthew) we find a different wording: **‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’.** There is a subtle difference in what the two evangelists wish to convey of the teaching of Jesus. 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. Whether in Luke or in Matthew, **Jesus wants us to be blessed.** In the Bible, blessed means the kind of happiness that only God can give, the kind he created us for, the kind we yearn for in the depths of our hearts and that we can never seem to find. Jesus begins his first sermon in the Gospel of Luke telling us the path to this kind of happiness. This is what he wants for us: **Happiness is a fulfillment that goes deeper than the superficial kind that comes with money, power, pleasure or popularity. Jesus came to show us how to live like that. Everything he teaches, everything he asks of us, everything the Church teaches about how to live, what to do, what to avoid are meant for our benefit, for our blessedness. Jesus doesn’t want us to waste our lives; he wants us to be free from all the worldly desires and worries, he wants us to live life to the full.**

In this Sunday's first reading, Jeremiah (17:5-8) paints two contrasting pictures to describe this kind of happiness. He describes the happy man as being like a tree planted near a deep, flowing stream. Its roots always give it enough moisture to flourish, even in times of drought. It makes me think of those elegant willow trees that grow in marshy soil. Their branches are laden with thousands of tiny green leaves that rustle and shimmer in the wind. In the summer they are so full of leaves that their branches seem to disappear. That's an image of what Jesus wants for us - **a flourishing, fruitful, healthy life**. It comes from rooting ourselves in friendship with him: he is the flowing stream. What about those who don't follow the Lord? Jeremiah says they are like a dry shrub in the wilderness, like a dwarf juniper tree, a gloomy, stunted plant, hard and mangy, with scale-like leaves that cling close to its gnarled trunk. They make me think of Charlie Brown's Christmas tree. Withered, weak, sad. Like tumbleweeds: rootless, fruitless, brown, dried up, good for nothing. Jesus is telling us that this is what happens to those who base their happiness on the passing things like money and popularity, instead of basing it on friendship with God. Which would you rather be? A flourishing, fruitful tree, or a broken peanut shell? Jesus wants us to flourish. He wants us to be blessed. ***Blessed are you who are poor, who are hungry, who weep. Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you, and defame you.***

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus also looked to another group of people who are like most of us and said, ***Woe to you who are rich, who are full, and who are laughing. Woe to you when all speak well of you.*** How can this be? Doesn't Jesus have it all upside down? If the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the hated, the excluded, and the reviled are the happy ones, does Jesus mean that hunger and grief will improve us? Why would we honour being poor? Don't we use our wealth to serve God's purposes? Could we not do more for our neighbours if we had more with which to help them?" How do we answer these inevitable questions? In using these sayings, these "blessed"s and "woe"s, Jesus is not glamorizing poverty and suffering. Surely he knew as well as we know that poverty can lead to despair and suicide, even to crime and violence. But he also knew that need can lead us to God. Poverty and hunger and despair can provide a beginning for one seeking unity with God. He added the "woe"s because he knew that most people like us would have a hard time imagining that being poor could help a person. Jesus listed the woeful and miserable to get our attention. Through these "blessed"s and "woe"s, Jesus calls us to join the spirit of the poor 2000 years ago. Those have-nots of the first century of whom Jesus spoke had nothing to expect from the world, but they had everything to expect from God. It is through their need that Jesus shows us the way to turn to God for help in our lives and in our attitudes and in our values.

Brothers and sisters, our deep sense of helplessness can bring us before God just as we are – not as we imagine ourselves to be. We can recognize the power of God that can transform us into the happy, complete, caring and loving people Jesus calls us to be. The poor can help us get to that glorious day when we will give up seeking personal resources of privilege or power as the path to true happiness. Above all, Jesus knew that purchasing material possessions, and buying insurance, and setting aside savings for retirement or rainy days would lead us to imagine ourselves as safe and secure and in control of our lives. He knew that people like us stand constantly in danger of assuming, consciously or subconsciously, that we can work our way into happiness or buy our way into eternal joy and peace like the world constantly tells us. However, poverty is a means to giving us greater freedom to follow Christ without compromise like the many saints who had gone before us. The poor can help us see the need for a power greater than ourselves, to heal us and give us happiness and meaning. It helps us come to the day when we will see clearly the source of this power: Jesus, the Christ, our Saviour. And on that day, we will join with the saints of all ages as we ***“rejoice and leap for joy.”***