

Sixth Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Jer 17:5-8

1 Cor 15:12, 16-20

Ps 1

Lk 6:17, 20-26

Speaking well of false prophets

I know I've told you before that I am irresistibly drawn to the "hard sayings" of Jesus, much more than to his comforting or consoling words. I think that's because I want to know the truth that will set me free. Set free from my hard-headedness that is too comfortably content with empty slogans that masquerade as truth. Set free from my hard-heartedness that becomes cozily complacent in its love of comfort and resists *metanoia*. Hard words are needed for such a hard head, for such a hard heart. They are the right tool. And I welcome them. Overthrow my puny intellect, O God, with its arrogance and ignorance, with its excuses and evasions! Take a battering ram to the selfish shield set up around my heart and reduce to rubble my sense of sufficiency, my complacency, my awful and shameful complicity!

There is not a word that Jesus says that he does not say with love. Even his hard sayings. Especially his hard sayings. In Luke's gospel, Jesus pronounces four beatitudes and four woes that mirror each other. Like in our first reading, where the prophet Jeremiah announced the word of God concerning the blessing and the curse – cursed is the one who trusts in men; blessed is the one who trust in God – so Jesus speaks the word of God – blessings and woes – to the great crowd who had come to hear him. The blessings are the

wisdom of God. The woes are the wisdom of the world. Listen. Hear. And choose.

Jesus blesses those who are poor, hungry, weeping, hated, and promises them relief and joy. These blessings are hard words if you are ruled by the wisdom of the world. Hard because foolish. Hard because they don't make sense. Hard because how can poverty, hunger, sorrow, and being hated be a blessing? *"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength"* (1 Cor 1:18, 25). A hard saying.

When it comes to the rich, the filled, the laughing, the spoken well of, Jesus does not pronounce a *curse* upon them, but a *woe*. Now *these* are hard words. They were hard words then. They are hard words now. I wonder if Jesus shouted these woes with righteous anger, condemning, blaming, pointing the finger in accusation. That's a fine enough reading, and one that can hammer away at our stubborn resistance. But what if his tone were softer, sadder, beseeching, warning us – the well-fed, highly spoken-of, merry-making rich – out of love warning us against the disaster that is sure to befall us if we persist, if we insist, in following the way of the world instead of the way of truth and life?

With very few exceptions, those of us here, we are rich. Woe to us. Our riches, cold and lifeless, are all the consolation we will have. Desolation will be our consolation. Woe to us. We are, all of us,

filled. And our bodies show it. We will ache with hunger. Rich and full, we are given to laughter. The day will come when we will know loss, and stripped of our riches, debilitated by hunger pangs, we will weep. Woe to us. We love to hear the false prophets speak, confirming our hardheadedness, excusing our hardheartedness, flattering our prejudices, encouraging our willful ignorance. And we return the favor and speak well of them. Woe to us, indeed. This last woe is the hard saying that I want to focus on today.

In his final woe, Jesus is sad for us when “all speak well” of us, and why? Because this is how people treat false prophets. True prophets, like Jeremiah, end up being despised. Some of them hated. Some of them banished, or imprisoned, or put to death. Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Jesus. And this by their own people. Their own turn against them, because their own prefer courting favor with the world and its powers and principalities. Corrupt in mind and worldly at heart, we prefer lies to truth and darkness to light (Jn 3:19). We resist freedom and grace because we are cozy with our slavery and our sin. Woe to us, indeed.

I didn't notice at first just how indicting that final woe is. In its first part, it indicts those who are well spoken of. So if you find yourself well spoken of, be on your guard, you may just be a false prophet. This is its meaning and warning.

You can't imagine how this hard saying of Jesus challenges me, how I wrestle with it, how it makes me ask myself why I am not bolder and more daring in speaking God's word and God's truth to the

people God loves. They might turn against me. Don't talk to them about their love of money. Don't talk to them about their "immorality." And certainly don't talk to them about their politics. Truth is, I like being spoken well of. It is comfortable. Being walked out on, being whispered against, being suspected, being boycotted. How can that be a blessing? Dare I speak as Jesus spoke? Dare I risk the consequences? Questions we might all ponder.

But this final woe also indicts those who speak well of others. There is a real stinger in this last woe: "for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way." Meaning their ancestors spoke well of imposters, posers, charlatans, and crooks who dressed themselves up in the mantle of religion and claimed that they were speaking for God. Those who spoke well of these fakes were complicit and are now rightly pointed out for lending their support to fraudulent usurpers: the false prophets. I remind you of the prophecy of St Paul in 2 Timothy: *"the time will come when people will not tolerate sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths"* (4:3-4 RSV).

With this woe in mind, we do well to examine carefully whom we are praising, complimenting, speaking well of, supporting. And whether we are doing so in light of the Way or in light of the world. We do well to remember that the ends do not justify the means. And that we have a prophetic duty to call out falsehood, to oppose corruption – even and especially when "our side" is guilty of it –

and to stand on the side of the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and those who are singled out for hatred, exclusion, and insult because they are true to the gospel and its values in the face of those whose loyalties ... lie elsewhere, let's say.

Among the false prophets today – and there are many, of many different stripes – are those who are peddling nationalism by trying to wrap it up in the gospel. Christian nationalism they call it. It is not Christian. It is nationalism, which of course is not the same as patriotism. Christian nationalism is not prophetic. It is political. And its preachers – so bold, so courageous, so fearless – see how well they are spoken of – are in fact betraying the gospel, not serving it. Appealing to resentment, paranoia, apocalyptic fears of cultural and civic collapse, they are seeking “strength in flesh,” which we heard God explicitly condemn through the prophet Jeremiah.

Last summer I spent a good part of one homily expressing my concerns about the growing menace of nationalism in our country, rebranded as “Christian” nationalism, to make it more palatable to the unaware. Several people who heard that homily mentioned to me afterwards that they had not heard of Christian nationalism. I reckon that has changed. And because repetition is the mother of learning, I will remind you of what I said last July:

One of the many problems with Christian nationalism is that it is motivated not by trust in God, but by fear and unbelief. Jesus said to Paul, *“my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”* So-called Christian nationalism has no patience for this

and would rather boast of its strength and the numbers of its billionaire supporters, its army of contemptible J6 vandals and their insurrectionist sympathizers. Christian nationalism “seeks strength in flesh” to lay hold to the wealth and influence of corporations, to corral, capture, and control politicians, and then to use the power of the state so as to bring about what *it says* is the kingdom of God here and now, preferably in America. America first. America always. America forever. America and the kingdom of God somehow become almost indistinguishable. But this is a corruption of Christianity. It is an attempt at baptizing one’s political preferences, one’s own partisanship and love of power, and calling it Christian. It is, in a word, a kind of blasphemy.

When and where has it ever turned out for the better that Christians and the Church align themselves with power, especially the power of the state? There is no page of the gospel, no page of history that justifies Christianity becoming cozy with power. Every time, it has ended badly, because power corrupts and produces a counterfeit Christianity whose goals – whose ends and means – are foreign to the gospel and closely aligned with state power.

If so-called Christian nationalism manages to prevail, it will in due course show itself to be nothing but regular ole nationalism, with all its authoritarian proclivities, and then Christianity will be despised as an enabler and collaborator of the harm that will follow.

Christian nationalism seeks power. It does not seek Jesus, whose grace is enough and who teaches that weakness brings power to

perfection. *“Insults, hardships, persecutions, constraints,”* these, the Scriptures teach us, are what make the power of Christ dwell within us. The power of the state, the power of coercion, this is not for the Christian, not for Christianity, not for the Church.

Jesus gave his disciples no mandate to seize power, much less the power of the state. On the contrary, when the crowds threatened to carry Jesus off to make him king, he withdrew alone to the mountain (Jn 6:15). And when he came down the mountain he taught and he blessed, as we read in today’s gospel. He blessed the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and those hated for their loyalty to him. The powerful received no blessing, but only woes for their riches, their full bellies, their laughter, and for the empty praise heaped upon them by those shamefully incapable of telling truth from lies, light from darkness, a true prophet from a false one.

This last woe, I think, is the most terrible of all, the one most to be feared. Our riches we can give away, and our food, too. We can grieve and weep with the sorrowful and forego our silly laughter. But if others see in us something of the corrupt false prophets whose treachery and deceit they admire, then woe to us, and woe again, for they will speak well of us, and we will be doomed.

Spare me, O Lord, this woe and every woe. Give me the courage to follow you faithfully, to speak your gospel boldly, to love others, even enemies, kindly. Give me only your love and your grace, that will be enough for me. Amen.