

Epiphany 6
17/2/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
Luke 6:17-26

Rooted, Resilient, Reconciled

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.
Amen.*

Our readings today are a little bit full on. Each of them puts into stark terms what is at stake in hearing and responding to the call of God.

Happiness and blessing are set in contrast to wickedness and woe.

As the Psalmist writes:

“Happy are those | who do not follow the advice of the wicked, ... but delight in the law of the Lord, | on which they meditate day and night.” (Ps 1.1-2)

“The wicked ... are like chaff that the wind drives away. | [they] will not stand in the judgement, | nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.” (Ps 1.1a, 4b)

Wicked sinners are advised that this would be the time to step outside.

This theme from Psalm 1 of the blessed and the cursed, those who trust in mortals and those who delight in the Lord, is echoed in Jeremiah 17.

In both cases we hear the faint echoes of the ancient Jewish Wisdom tradition - which we see most clearly elsewhere in texts like *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*. This tradition within our Scripture emphasises the right or wise way of living, underneath the sovereign gaze of the Lord above.

Texts within this tradition emphasise the importance of living in a way that respects the eternal wisdom of the Lord. And these texts call on human beings to acknowledge their weakness and limited knowledge in the face of our common mortality.

Jeremiah reflects on these themes in reference to the weakness of mere flesh, and the devious and perverse nature of the human heart. We are led, in response, to trust in the Lord above who tests the mind and searches the heart.

All of this seems rather familiar to anyone who has read the advice of Scripture to live an upright life. To attend to an ethical standard in one's conduct. To be moral, and wise, and good.

There is enough wisdom in simply saying that we should all seek to do what is right and moral, under the gaze of the sovereign Lord.

Perhaps this should be a short sermon.

However, ... what struck me in Psalm 1, and in Jeremiah 17, was not the reminder of the sovereign Lord above. But rather this common image - which recurs in other parts of Scripture: of a tree planted by a stream of water.

Those who trust in the Lord are rooted by a stream. A stream that feeds, and nourishes. A stream that nurtures resilience. A stream that helps us to bear the fruits of goodness, even when the rains do not come, and the sun bears down upon us.

What struck me in the call to a good and wise life in our readings was not the sovereign Lord above, but the Lord below: in whom we are rooted, and nourished, and fed. From whom flows all goodness, and through whom we are able to bear good fruit.

There is a not so idle point here in how we should read these texts from the Hebrew Bible that are also part of our Christian Scriptures. An older attitude saw in the First Testament an emphasis on law and the call to right living, and therefore an emphasis on our own efforts and moral character. What we see in this image of being rooted next to a nourishing stream is, in fact, the deep well of love that runs through the Hebrew Bible. The love of God for people who seek to remain rooted, and trusting in the Lord.

These readings do not call on us to rely on our own strength. Quite the opposite. They call us to be rooted next to the stream of God's love, from whom all goodness flows: that we might be resilient, and that we might bear good fruit.

The call of God is not first and foremost to aspire to the lofty heights of perfection. But to settle into the rooted nourishment of the love of God.

Settled here the power of God flows out for healing and comfort.

...

This is where we pick up our reading from Luke's Gospel.

Gathered on a level place, people come to gather around Jesus. We are told that the people tried to touch him: the power of God flowed out of Jesus for healing and comfort.

And so the people gathered to sit alongside the one who elsewhere offers a wellspring of living water.

And this is what came out from the mouth of the river:

“Blessed are you who are poor, | for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, | for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, | for you will laugh.”

(Lk 6.20-21)

What struck me in our Psalm, and in our reading from Jeremiah 17, strikes me again here. Not the God who is above, but the God who is below. The God who offers blessing to the poor, to the hungry, and to those who weep.

What Jesus offers here, as the power of God flowed out from him, is healing and comfort to the poor, and to the lowly.

Jesus makes clear where the stream of God's love flows. Jesus makes clear how the river marks the borders of God's new kingdom.

The river of God's love, flowing out with healing and comfort, twists and bends towards the poor: they are within God's kingdom.

The river of God's love, nourishes and nurtures the land, that those who are hungry should be fed by the land.

The river of God's love washes away the tears, and becomes a babbling brook in which to splash and play with joy.

Rooted by this river, following where the stream flows, we “shall not fear when heat comes, | and [our] leaves shall stay green; ... and [we will] not cease to bear fruit.” (Jer 17.8)

Jesus offers us here an echo of what we find in our Psalm, and in the words of Jeremiah. Not simply a path which we must travel alone to moral perfection. But a grounded, rooted resilience.

Jesus’ teaching is not first a statement about what we should do, but is first a statement about the contours of God and God’s love.

The challenge this teaching poses to us is whether we will allow ourselves to be caught up in the contours of this love of God, flowing through the world. The challenge is whether we will live out our participation in Christ, through our baptism in water: a grounded, rooted resilience. In Christ we have the hope of new leaves, and new branches, new fruit, and new life.

Jesus tells us clearly in today’s reading what this participation, this rootedness, in the life of God’s love will look like. And he places in stark terms what failing to participate in this love will mean.

Will we heed the calling of God, to settle by the river? To gather together and nourish and feed one another, and so be fed by God? Will we follow as the streams of God’s love ebb and flow, carving a shape into the landscape: bending towards the poor, and the hungry, and those weeping? Will we be rooted next to the river of the resilient love of God?

I want to finish with a short quotation from the chorus of a beautiful song by two artists, Laura Marling and Johnny Flynn:

“The water sustains me without even trying
The water can’t drown me, I’m done
With my dying”

This is the new life of baptism, the new life offered in Christ. *Amen*

We offer thanks and praise, O God, because you have created and sustained us and all things.

And yet, merciful God ...

*Forgive us when we have failed to be rooted in you Seeking to fix the
world in our own mortal strength
Relying on ourselves and not you, Lord*

*Forgive us when we have failed to follow your ways
Following the advice of the wicked
And not reflecting on your wisdom*

*Forgive us when we have failed to listen to your call Like shrubs
in the desert that refuse the rain
And those who live in wilderness that refuse help*

Above all,

*Forgive us when we have failed to be sustained by you
Failing to live out our baptism
Failing to be fed at your table
For failing to be your beloved people
For failing to love the poor, and the hungry, and those who weep*

Forgive us, O God

Amen.