

Now may I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our two readings today are full of contrasts. In the gospel from Saint Luke, Jesus draws a whole load of contrasts that we call that the Beatitudes. He says blessed are the poor, but woe to the rich. Blessed are those who weep now, but woe to those of you who are laughing now. Blessed are you who are hungry now, but woe to those who are full. And there are several contrasts here between the rich and the poor, the sad and the happy, the hungry and the full.

However, it's not those contrasts that I want to talk about this morning. I want to talk instead about the contrasts in the reading that's there from the prophet Jeremiah that we heard. Jeremiah draws a powerful contrast between the cursed and the blessed. He says, cursed are those who trust in mere mortals. But blessed are those who trust in the Lord. And then he provides a powerful image to illustrate the contrast that he is making. Those who trust in mere mortals are like a shrub in the desert. But those who trust in the Lord are like a tree planted by the water.

So, two trees, well, a shrub and a tree. They have some things in common and some striking differences. What these two types of people represented by the two trees have in common is that they both trust. Where they differ, is in the object of their trust.

The shrub-type people trust in mere mortals. The tree-like people trust in the Lord. And I'm picking up here on a theme that I was talking about last week. Do you remember if you were here, the story of St. Peter who'd been fishing all night and caught nothing? Then Jesus said to him, put out your nets into the deep water. Do you remember how Peter replied? "If you say so." He didn't see any fish. He'd been out all night, caught nothing. It was he who was the professional fisherman, not Jesus. And yet he did as Jesus instructed, "If you say so", he said. And because he trusted Jesus and followed his lead, his nets were soon overflowing

with fish. "If you say so", was St. Peter's way of saying to Jesus, I trust you. At the time in which Jeremiah was writing, the people of Israel were not trusting God who'd led them all those years from the promised land. They were surrounded by an enemy. The Babylonian army were massing at their borders. They'd no doubt be feeling as the Ukrainian people are feeling now. And this dire situation didn't lead them to pray to the Lord or to trust God. Their leaders instead ran around frantically trying to form alliances with neighbors. They thought they were so clever that they'd be able to negotiate their way out of the situation. They trusted in their own wisdom. And needless to say, sadly, they were soon overrun.

That's why Jeremiah begins this passage by saying "cursed are those who trust in mere mortals". He was encouraging the people and their leaders to trust in God, the Lord that had guided them throughout their history. His complaint wasn't that the people weren't trusting, they were trusting. It's just they were trusting in the wrong thing. Their trust was misplaced. And the challenge that this story provides us, is to lead us to ask ourselves who or what are we trusting in? Where do we put our trust?

In this season of Oscar nominations, let me share some thoughts about acting. There's no doubt that some actors can be a lump of coal in some film, and then at the hands of a different director be magnificent in other films. You'll have your own examples. Katharine Hepburn is one. She did her greatest films with the director George Cukor. Matched up with a different director like Stuart Miller, her movies suffered. John Wayne, 15 fantastic films with John Ford, but lost that luster with John Huston as director. Cary Grant, his best films were with Howard Hawks. He himself couldn't bear to watch himself in Arsenic and Old Lace when the director was Frank Capra. What is the key to a winning pair of director and actor? Richard Brown, professor of cinema at New York said this: "It's only about one thing, trust".

A director must trust that an actor has the character inside of them. And an actor must trust a director with their performance, their work, and their image on screen. There must be times when an actor doesn't want to do something that the director says, that they think it'd be much better if they did it in a different way. But it works when the actor says to the director, "if you say so". The actor is showing their trust, when they reply by doing as the director instructs and directs. It says in the book of Proverbs, trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight.

So, two trees representing two different types of people, both trust. But only one of the trees has roots, which provide water. The tree planted by the water sends out its roots by the stream. The Bible talks about roots and their importance in other places in scripture. Saint Paul writes about being rooted and grounded in love. And then Jesus tells the parable of the Sower who sows his seed and some of the seed falls on rocky ground. It sprang up but withered when the sun came out because it had no roots.

I wrote recently in the Chimes about my bonsai trees, which I've had for many years. When I go back at new year, I always have to dig them up to prune their roots. Because by cutting back the roots, you stunt the growth of the trees and keep them small. And I'm particularly concerned to cut out tap roots. You don't want tap roots. You want feathery roots that can't take up much water, so the tree is stunted.

In my spiritual life, I'm going for the exact opposite. Jeremiah is encouraging us to trust in the Lord and to develop a nice, strong, spiritual tap root, which goes into spiritual resources. We need to be drawing on God's Holy Spirit, that living water to refresh and sustain us. We are not to trust in our own resources, our own strength, but rather we are to trust in the Spirit that gives life and sustains. That way Jeremiah says we shall not fear when heat comes.

We're not to be like the weed, which grows and withers when the sun comes out. We're to be like a tree planted by the stream, which can draw on streams of living water to flourish in dry times.

What is it that sustains us? From where are we to draw our spiritual resources? As I said last week, the great advantage of a late Easter is that Lent begins late. So, we have more time to prepare, more time to ask ourselves, what might we do? What might we take on in Lent to develop those spiritual resources, to grow a big spiritual tap root? We might resolve to take time to pray, to read scripture, to learn with other Christians about ways to develop a spiritual root system. Let's aim to be like a tree trusting in God and sending out roots to draw on streams of God's living water.

Amen.