

SERMON      KRIJTBURG      SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12TH 2022

Jeremiah 17, 5 – 8, and Luke 6, 17 + 20 – 26.

Gregory Brenninkmeijer SJ

The prophet Jeremiah, my dear friends, lived approximately 600 years before Luke, the evangelist. During the reign of the last kings of Judah Jeremiah held up to those rulers, in words not to be misunderstood, that the wellbeing of their nation and people would not be secured by their manipulations of power, but exclusively by their loyal adherence to their covenant with their God.

600 years later Saint Luke tells us that Jesus, in different words, gives his followers exactly the same message: Not by securing wealth and power will you lead a fruitful life, but only by following in my footsteps, living simply, not bent on great success or becoming famous. And today, 2000 years later, the church offers us the same message in this Sunday's readings and expects me to preach a meaningful sermon on that unpopular subject.

Because, let's face it, Jeremiah's and Jesus' message may be true and understandably so, but it never convinced the majority of the world's population. Just read the papers, follow the news: It is all about the great, the rich, the powerful. It is all about success, achieved or aimed for. It is about the important persons, about those who worked themselves up to BNet status, and about those who misused their status. You read about those who are bigger, faster, richer, more beautiful, more attractive, more crafty. Ask young people what they will want to achieve in their life. Many will come up with their version of a great job, earning them lots of money to be able to live a happy and care-free life. There is nothing wrong with that, is there? This is what our world, our culture suggests as the normal and commonly accepted goal of our lives.

But here am I, in the uninterrupted line of preachers, repeating once again the strong words that Jesus spoke to his followers: "Happy you, who are poor, who are hungry and who are those who weep. Yes, happy the unpopularity of following this Son of Man, because great will be your reward in heaven." In a culture where we go for immediate satisfaction of our every desire this cannot be the most attractive reward imaginable, is it? And do you not agree that there is nothing good about real poverty? The followers of Jesus, the Christians, have over the ages been the greatest helpers, worldwide, of the needy. And the efforts of religiously inspired workers against hunger is unequalled in our world. It was the vision of religiously inspired groups that started it. And that certainly was not because they thought that hunger made their people happy.

Yet in his days Jesus never retracted his words. If He had done so, I am sure it would have been mentioned loud and clear by those writing the gospels. No, Jesus' words stand as they were proclaimed and we will have to deal with them.

Now one thing that speaks in favor of them is the fact, that living the values of the world, the bigger, the greater, the richer and mightier, has not brought the world much happiness either. Our history is a history of wars and conflicts, of crimes and broken promises. It is a history of greatness achieved at the cost of others. It is a history of suppression and fights for

freedom. It is a history of inequality and exploitation. A history we cannot possibly call 'Happy' by any standard.

How then can we understand Jesus' words? How can they make sense to us as we hear them read today? Jesus obviously does not propagate poverty. He is not in favor of people being hungry and certainly does not enjoy them weeping. But in the poor, the hungry, the grieving Jesus experiences their openness to each other, their readiness to help and to be helped, their openness to himself, openness to God. In many gospel stories Jesus finds lots and lots of people eager to hear his words, looking for healing or a reassuring word. But at the same time in the background or at the side he finds the scribes, the Pharisees, the people who know, who have and who are locked up in their wisdom. They always doubt, find fault and disagree. If they come up with a question it is to catch Jesus out, or to trick Him into irregularities. They are the healthy who do not need a physician whereas the sick, the prostitutes and tax collectors, they came to be helped, heard and welcomed into the kingdom of God. The rich can look after themselves and do not need a God. But the poor have only God to rely on for help. The wealthier we become in our part of the world the more people lose their faith in a loving, helping God.

Happy are those who are open. Open to the need of their needy intimate self. Lord, make that I may see! If you will it you can make me clean! Lord, come, my servant is sick, my daughter is dying! Come and make her live! Happy are those who acknowledge their neediness and are prepared to ask for help. And happy are they who are open to see the needs of others and are able to go out of their way to help. Happy are we, if we are open to the words of Jesus, who will always be ready to help and will always ask us to help each other. That is the kingdom of God, the only place of real happiness.  
Amen.