

13 February 2022

Jeremiah 17:5-10  
1 Corinthians 15:12-20  
Luke 6:17-26

Around the time I arrived to become vicar in Whanganui, there was a ferment going on about moves to abolish the practice of opening each District Council meeting with a Christian prayer.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the motto on the city's coat of arms is *Sans Dieu Rien*, meaning "Without God nothing". My guess would be that for many of the city's leaders and populace in the twenty first century, that motto means nothing.

Palmerston North in contrast has a motto more likely to fit the commonly held views of majority of the population: *Palmarum Qui Meruit Ferat*, "Let the one who has earned it, bear the reward".

Talking of ironic mottos, I have long been bemused by the motto "In God we trust" featuring prominently on the banknotes and coins of the United States. (It was not until almost a century *after* it began to be used on currency that the statement was formally adopted by the Federal Government as the national motto.) The use of the motto originated when a pastor petitioned the Treasury Department to add a statement recognizing "Almighty God in some form on our coins" in order to "relieve us from the ignominy of heathenism". But at least part of the motivation was to declare that God was on the Union side of the Civil War, given that the other side had invoked God in their Constitution.<sup>2</sup>

Whose side was God on, really? Does God take sides?

Saint Paul would, I'm sure, be happy to stand under the motto of "Without God nothing". His message, in 1 Corinthians 15, is related – effectively "without resurrection nothing": he writes, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

It seems that there had developed a faction within the Christian community in Corinth that denied the hope of resurrection for the faithful. The Christian community was

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/6563096/Wanganui-District-Council-abolishes-prayer>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%22In\\_God\\_We\\_Trust%22](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%22In_God_We_Trust%22)

united in the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead, that he enjoyed renewed life with a renewed physical body that was never to undergo death again. Some believed that what had happened to Jesus was the model for what will happen to all the faithful at the end of the present age – what is referred to as the “general resurrection”. These believed that those who trusted in God would not suffer eternal death, but would, like Jesus, enjoy renewed life with a renewed physical body, and that this would happen for all together at the same time when the new age of the fullness of God’s reign begins.

Some however believed that there would be no such general resurrection.

Paul sides with the first group. And his argument for general resurrection is based on the logic that starts with the point of agreement between the factions – God raised Jesus from the dead – and then moves to the corollary which answers the point in dispute – God raised Jesus from the dead *and therefore* God will similarly raise all those Jesus has claimed for his own.

And the thing is, this matters, because *resurrection changes everything*. Paul writes, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Or, to put it another way, “if all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we’re a pretty sorry lot.”<sup>3</sup> How we regard the future affects how we live now. Do we live as people who have a positive view of the future and who see the life we live now as having some relevance to that future? Or do we live as people who have no hope, as people who therefore live simply for now?

So our belief takes us to ethics. As Tom Wright has written, “A genuinely Christian ethic would ask: granted that God is going to create a new world, and give us a newly embodied life, in the future, what sort of life is appropriate in the present?”<sup>4</sup>

Resurrection – for Jesus already, and for us in the future – is both a physical and spiritual thing: *all* of what it means to be alive is brought to life again. We moderns

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Twelve*, p.31

have an unfortunate tendency to want to separate the spiritual and the physical, the religious and the day-to-day, and so on. So when we come to the blessings and woes of Jesus in Luke 6 we find that there are some who try to spiritualise the message – “Jesus is talking about the *spiritually* poor, not the actual poor”.<sup>5</sup> And I find myself wondering if those who try to spiritualise the message might be just a bit close to those addressed by Jesus in “Woe to you who are rich”, now feeling more than a little discomforted. For the haves, spiritualising the message means being able to conveniently ignore its implications.

Jesus has been on a mountainside all night, praying. When morning comes, he calls his disciples to him, and from among them he sets apart twelve to be apostles – agents of Jesus, bearers of the commission to carry his message. The number twelve is significant, because that was the number of the tribes of Israel. Jesus is beginning to establish a renewed Israel, a renewed people of God, to be God’s witnesses to the world around them.

Jesus then proceeds from the mountainside with them, till they come to a level place. (This level place could easily have been a plateau a bit further down the mountain from where Jesus had prayed, and so Luke’s account need not be seen as describing a different event from what Matthew records in what we know as the “Sermon on the Mount”).

With renewed Israel around him, Jesus now addresses them with a renewed covenant:

Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who hunger now,  
for you will be satisfied.  
Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.  
Blessed are you when people hate you,  
when they exclude you and insult you

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<sup>5</sup> “The contrast on which we should focus is not between material and spiritual poverty, but between the way of the powerful and the way of the powerless – who are likely to be poor in all senses, certainly in first-century Israel” [N T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p.288 n.172]

and reject your name as evil,  
because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

Jesus addresses his disciples, this renewed Israel, with a covenant that seems to be upside-down relative to normal human expectation about how things work. What Jesus sets out is far from “Let the one who has earned it, bear the reward”. “The world values the winners, but Jesus pronounces the losers, the marginal in Galilee, as blessed because God is ‘for them, not against them.’”<sup>6</sup>

It is not that Jesus is saying that there is something virtuous about being poor or hungry in itself. Jesus is not saying that it is better to be poor, or hungry, or hated, etc. What he is announcing is that God cares about, and will deal with, the injustice that reigns within the world at present, the injustice that means some are constantly pushed down. God is about the business of turning the world right way up again.

And those who benefit from the present situation, who like things just as they are, are not going to like it as things get re-ordered.

A few years ago, leaders in our diocese recognised that some rebalancing needed to occur; that in order to strengthen the body as a whole, some identified gaps needed to be prioritised.<sup>7</sup> For example, it was recognised that we had a gap relating to young people, but had a strong presence of older people; we had a relative gap in lay ministry, while a strong presence in ordained ministry; a gap in apostolic, prophetic and evangelistic leadership, against strength in pastoral and teaching leadership; a gap in ethnic diversity while a strong presence in New Zealand European. What a challenge to those who, like me, might be older, ordained, pastor/teachers, New Zealand Europeans. What I have found interesting is the strength of feeling among the groups identified as strongly present when new initiatives have prioritised addressing the identified gaps. We don't like it when

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<sup>6</sup> Garland, *Luke*, p. 276, quoting Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, Fortress, 1988, p.138

<sup>7</sup> See Schedule 2 of the *Diocesan Governance Canon 2016*, page DC 9-9 (found as page 54 of the pdf available here:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e79091454d50902b3a0bf71/t/5fc6ba427995075abdcaf556/1606859364122/2020%2BDiocesan%2BCanons%5B1%5D.pdf> )

things get reordered against us, even if only for a season to renew a needed balance!

When we find ourselves discomfited at the promotion of the cause of some group or other, we do well to carefully reflect on the reason for our discomfort. Jesus' message to us is "Woe!" It is an interjection; it is meant to stop us in our tracks; a wake-up call to examine what we're really about and whose business we're about.

Jesus announced these blessings and woes to his followers, among whom were those he had appointed to be his messengers. The coming of the justice of God is a fundamental part of the message of Christ, the good news.

Jesus announced these blessings to his followers and messengers. The term *blessed* refers to one who is the object of grace and is happy because of it.<sup>8</sup> It is not to say that those who are blessed face an easy life. Jesus tells them to rejoice in the midst of the hardships they face, for this is how the prophets of old were treated. The thing is, following Christ and bearing his message is likely to put one outside the realm of the well-off, those with plenty and comfort. It is a business that is risky – not least because of the reaction of those who don't like the message. But to these messengers and followers, Jesus says "Rejoice". Rejoice for you're on the side of God; and God is on your side.

US banknotes declare "In God we trust". Jeremiah declared "cursed is the one who trusts in man" but "blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord". He was addressing a context in which there was great contention over what the nation should do in the face of significant external threat. The logical course, the human course, suggested making a political and military alliance with Egypt against the Babylonians. The word of God through the prophet made it clear that this was not the right call; the ways of political power and military might are not to be the ways for a people formed by God and under God's protection.

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<sup>8</sup> Bock, *Luke*

The issue of in whom or what we trust is at the root, in fact, of the Luke reading too, and this is again where the material and spiritual are joined. If we put our trust in our own abilities, in wealth, or in our own ability to claw our way to the top, then we will find that it will ultimately fail us. Those who truly trust in God, those who have given their full allegiance to God, they are the ones who will ultimately be blessed; they are the ones with a future.

And just as the spiritual and material are joined, so too are the future and the present. If we have hope for the future, then that gives impulse to our behaviour now. “Pronouncing the poor blessed becomes an exhortation to those who have the means to help them.”<sup>9</sup>

Blessings and woes; assurance and challenge. I pray the Holy Spirit will help us each to discern where we sit in relation to all this. I suspect that we’re all a bit of a mixture, that in some spheres of life we need to hear the assurance, and in others the challenge. Reducing our understanding of what is needed, and our evaluation of ourselves, to a simply slogan might not cover it.

Let us each reflect, then, asking God to do his discerning work among us.

“In God we trust!”

“Without God nothing!”

And if all that is so, then what are we called to do now?

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<sup>9</sup> Garland, *Luke*, p. 276

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