

There are many places in the Bible where we are told that certain kinds of people are blessed, and that certain other kinds of people are not. In today's first reading, from Jeremiah, those who 'trust in mere mortals' are cursed, whereas those who trust in the Lord are blessed, and compared to a fruitful tree. The Gospel reading, from Luke, blesses the poor, the hungry, the miserable, and those who are attacked for their faith. They are contrasted with the rich, the satisfied, and those who are enjoying themselves. 'Woe to them' says the text.

It is legitimate to feel some concern about passages in which large groups of people are apparently condemned. This is not merely because many of us might seem to belong to these groups ourselves. Such sweeping condemnation looks inconsistent with God's constant love for us, despite our weaknesses and our wrongdoings; a love most fully shown in Jesus' death on the cross. This inconsistency leads some people to question the authenticity of these passages, or alternatively to seek an interpretation which will not be so condemning. The best known example comes from Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus says 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God'. People often say he is really referring to a narrow gate in Jerusalem, which a camel could get through only by getting rid of all its baggage. Actually there is no evidence of any such gate in Jesus' time. Nevertheless, it does seem that the phrase 'the eye of a needle' was commonly used then to mean a narrow opening, so probably that interpretation is right: what Jesus means is that to enter the kingdom, the wealthy must set aside their concern for the things of this world.

It is in this way that we should understand today's Gospel. The translation does repeatedly say 'Woe to' those who are enjoying life, those who are well thought of, and so on. But an equally good translation would be 'alas for' them. Alas for them, because their lives are pointed in the wrong direction. Their concern in life is for money,

enjoyment, success in the world. Their present way of life is misdirected. It needs to be reformed, pointed in a new way: pointed in the way God wants them to go, the only way in which they will find a fulfilment that is really genuine. It's not that there is anything intrinsically wrong with enjoying life, or seeking familiar kinds of success; but if we build our lives around these things, if we build our lives around pleasing ourselves and seeking approval in the eyes of the world, we are missing out on what really matters. And I think this is clear if we reflect on it. If on your deathbed you were to look back on your life, and see your life's achievement to lie in having piled up a lot of money, or become famous and won a lot of prizes, or just had a lot of fun – there would be something badly lacking.

Both of today's readings are calling us to examine our lives. Today is Septuagesima, the Sunday on which our thoughts begin to turn towards Lent, the season of repentance. Repentance means seeing things in the right way, directing your life in the right way. It is often thought to mean feeling sorry for our sins, perhaps doing some kind of penance for them. There may be a place for that, but it is not what repentance is really about. The Greek word that is translated 'repentance' is 'metanoia', which literally means 'thinking after', with an emphasis on the *thinking*. It is a matter of thinking carefully, about things we have done, or not done: not for the sake of beating the breast, but for the purpose of reflecting on which of them really were wrong, or really right, whatever we may have thought before. Working for God's kingdom is not a matter of following rules, and apologising for breaking them. In the Middle Ages people often thought that way; they did a vast amount of penance for things they believed to be sins, but which were not sins at all, because they were taught to follow crude and simple rules. For the same reason, of course, much passed for perfectly all right that was profoundly sinful, including the way people treated those of other religions, or illegitimate children, or people who seemed abnormal, not least sexually. We too all have our blindnesses, taking for sin that which is

not sin, and taking for righteousness that which is sin. We need to reflect on our lives, and to ask whether some of the things we are proudest of are not in reality things we should be ashamed about: ashamed because we have done them to please ourselves, or to gain the approval of friends, without asking whether they do anything to promote the end that God has set before us: without considering what they might contribute to bringing about God's kingdom on earth.

'Blessed are those who trust in the Lord' says Jeremiah. He clearly does not mean that trusting in God will give us worldly success. He means we must see things in a new light. We must see things in God's light. Jesus tells us something of what that involves, in the verse that immediately follows today's Gospel. 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you' (Luke 6:27): in other words, love one another; think not about yourself and your own achievements, but about others, and be always ready to help them. For such is God's own love; of such is God's own kingdom.