

Model your life on Jesus

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Epiphany + 6: Jer 17 5-10 Ps 1 1 C 15 12-20 Lk 6 17-26

Michael Leunig once pictured a person telling a priest about terrible mood swings: 'Reverend Mother ... One minute I'm up, the next minute I'm down...'

The priest replies, 'You must pray to the patron saint of ups and downs, St Francis of a See-Saw'

There are plenty of ups and downs in today's scriptures. Jeremiah is down on people who think living without God is an option, and then praises the life of faith to the skies. Psalm 1 exalts the faithful, then comes down hard on the rest. Luke does the same in Jesus's 'sermon on the plain' with its blessings followed by the woe sayings.

There are also physical ups and downs. Just before today's passage, Jesus goes out to a mountain where he prays through the night. There, he calls his followers to come to him, and chooses the twelve from among them. Today, he goes down with these disciples to a plain, to a great crowd of his disciples and other people who've come from as far afield as Judea and Lebanon to hear him; many of them seeking to be healed. We're told that all who came to be healed received that healing. Then when he's done that, Jesus looks up at his disciples, and begins to teach.

I wondered when I read it whether Jesus was looking up from the side of the last sick person he'd just ministered to, or whether he'd sat down to teach in the customary way of Rabbis. Whatever the case, he's gone from a high place of prayer to a low place where he offers his ministry. That's where Jesus leads his disciples; from a high place of calling and prayer down to where the need is. He doesn't keep them up the

mountain to give them special, private knowledge. His model of leadership is the apprenticeship model. No sooner has he chosen the twelve than Jesus takes them down to where the people are so they can start work immediately. And we should note the order in which he works. First Jesus attends to the sick. Then he teaches about God's love for the down and out.

And what have we, his apprentices learned? By beginning on the mountain where he prayed, then going to the plain where he heals, Jesus has shown us that we should first seek God's strength for our work, and then go among the needy as hands-on care-givers. You've heard the saying 'people should practise what they preach.' Jesus does it this way; first seek God's strength, then serve, and then teach about God's love; how that calls us to respond to the needs of God's world.

Jesus's teaching is straightforward and challenging. He talks to the poor, the hungry, the grieving and the outcast, and declares them blessed now; blessed in the sight of God. And because they've either been cured and cleansed, or witnessed it happening to others, they'll know personally how trustworthy his words are.

Amongst that crowd stand Jesus's disciples – us. Jesus is talking to us at the same time as all the others, as if we're also poor, hungry, grieving and outcast. By including us – addressing us in this way – Jesus is calling us as apprentices to identify with these suffering ones; to love these people the way he himself does; to come among them and look after them just as we'd want to be treated if we were poor or hungry or grieving or outcast. No surprise then; five verses on from today's passage comes the golden rule. *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

But on the way to the Golden Rule are the woe sayings – woe to the rich, the full, the frivolous and the popular. These are extremely strong words – inescapable in their meaning. Luke has a real thing about the right use of wealth – it's still

part of Mediterranean culture to view the accumulation of wealth with deep suspicion. The pie is only so big. In Luke's culture, someone who has lots while anyone else goes hungry is nothing but a thief.

This is a very clear ethical issue in a traditional culture where a village is the normal size of a community. You can see who buys up the land of a neighbour who's fallen on hard times. You can see who builds bigger storehouses while poor people beg for scraps.

Sometimes, you can shame a person like that into changing. And when you do, the rich man is somehow set free, like Zacchaeus was by Jesus. But what does it mean for us in a globalised world? *Burning palm oil as so-called renewable-diesel*. You may be able shame a rich village sheikh into changing. But can you shame a global trade system which trashes the lands of the poor and destroys nature so that rich countries can prosper even more? The trouble with this sort of inequity is that it's pretty well invisible to much of the developed world; we're blind to it.

Jesus and his disciples were surrounded by the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the sick and the possessed, just as we are today. The reason Jesus's teachings carry the weight they do is that his teachings are perfectly reflected in his life. And the reason the Church has been able to pass on those teachings authentically is because, in every age, there have been some people and communities who have modelled their lives on the life of Jesus. Just like him, they've also put their lives on the line.

Throughout our history, there have always been people and communities who have heard today's Gospel as if for the first time. By the Holy Spirit's gift, they opened their lives, and let themselves be transformed by the Gospel.

The effect of such transformed lives is tremendous. These

people have brought the Holy Spirit's fire of renewal to their Church community in their own lifetimes, and they've passed on that heritage to us.

We saw today how Jesus went to the people – regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion or social standing. They came from everywhere; from Lebanon down to Jerusalem. And he simply went among them unconditionally, ministering first; dealing with explanations later – that's the model he's given us.

Now it's our turn; now we are the bearers of his Gospel of new life; new birth into the realm of God's love for all. May God give us the grace to live the gift of this new life unreservedly, and to hand it on authentically to coming generations. Amen