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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (February 15, 2004)

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

For us to grapple with the joys and trials of life, its blessings and woes, they should be placed in the context of the Paschal Mystery, the death-and-resurrection of Christ. In the pursuit of happiness we are challenged by Jeremiah and the Gospel to live according to principles rooted in a faith which is ordered to eternal life.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

We worship God to fulfil a creaturely responsibility, which must carry over into the details of daily life. As we seek God's blessings we ask pardon for the sins and failings that bring woes upon us.

Lord Jesus, renew your gift of forgiveness in our lives. Lord have mercy.
Lord Jesus, lead us to the waters of life. Christ have mercy.
Lord Jesus, satisfy our hunger and thirst with your presence. Lord have mercy.

HEADINGS FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Jer 17:5-8). The stark contrast between curse and blessing reminds us of the challenge to "choose life". To persevere in this life we must be rooted in God's presence. God is the source of living water.

Second Reading (1 Cor 15:12, 16-20). People's attitude toward the moral order is governed by their understanding of life's goal and meaning. Faith in the resurrection of Jesus is essential for the Christian life.

Gospel (Lk 6:17, 20-26). This version of the beatitudes contrasts the two ways by which people pursue happiness. The Gospel demands that we adhere to the right path even though this may be an occasion for persecution.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: Heavenly Father, through Baptism we have received gifts whose destiny is eternal life. Amid the trials and struggles of daily life, we present these petitions for the Church and all peoples of the world.

Reader:

May all teachers in the Church, especially Pope John Paul, the bishops and parents, guide the faithful in their care.

May the leaders of nations foster laws and practices that bring justice, harmony and peace to their communities.

May people in areas of conflict be led to safety and security by the efforts of true peacemakers.

May all who are searching for the meaning of life encounter the Word who brings true freedom and joy.

May all who have died, especially those who need our prayers, be brought to eternal life.

President: God of mercy, help the poor to open their hearts to your presence; may those who are persecuted be strengthened by the risen Lord. We offer this prayer through the same Christ our Lord.

INVITATION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

Through Baptism we share the life of God, through the self-giving Christ, who taught us to pray *Abba*, Father. United with Jesus in faith we say:

INVITATION TO HOLY COMMUNION

"Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink" (Jn 7:37). May all who receive their Lord in this Eucharist be blessed in time and eternity.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (integrity) in their daily lives should turn to the Eucharistic presence of the risen Christ as the source of their strength. The challenges that any adult vocation brings need not overwhelm those who acknowledge their human emptiness. Nourished by the living Bread they will progress from strength to strength.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Jer 17:5-8). The prophet and sages of Israel knew that some people become totally engrossed in responding to the trials of daily life. They found that an admonition or stern warning sometimes awakened them to the divine dimension in life. So Jeremiah uttered a curse against anyone whose heart (that is, the seat of intellect and will) had turned away from God. Such a person would not be guided by moral principles in social activities. This individual has lost the gift of spiritual life so will produce nothing of lasting value.

Aspects of the virtue known as hope include a trusting intimacy with God, as well as a commitment to assess all decisions in the light of one's eternal destiny. The sustaining presence of God in this person's heart is like the perennial source of water so necessary for life to flourish. This analogy is particularly powerful in the land of Israel, which has only one river and a few springs. The blessing of water is purifying and life-sustaining, so it became a symbol of forgiveness of sin and eternal life for Jews and Christians.

Second Reading (1 Cor 15:12,16-20). The appeal to Greeks of faith in one God gave Paul an opening to introduce the Gospel of forgiveness and life. Philosophers had gained an insight into the immortality of the spiritual life-principle or soul. However, the Christian message must focus on the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death-and-resurrection, proclaimed in last Sunday's reading (1 Cor 15:3-5). The Hebrew culture stressed the goodness of material creation as God's work (see Gen 1:10, 12, 18,

25...); some Greek thinkers, however, were so enamoured of the spiritual order that they disparaged the material world. The body was merely a temporary "envelope" from which the soul was liberated at death. Paul might have argued that the soul and body are partners in all deeds of good or evil in this life, so both should be rewarded or punished accordingly. However, he chose rather to focus on the Paschal Mystery, which these Christians had accepted in faith. What a benefit comes to the people who live their faith in deeds of loving service! The resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee for their hope. The "first fruits" were the best portion of the harvest presented to God in the Temple. The risen Christ is a sign that the life bestowed as God's free gift (grace) through his Son's suffering transcends the mystery of physical death. The Creator can accomplish his promises in the new creation.

Gospel (Lk 6:17, 20-26). The evangelist built his synthesis of Jesus' deeds and teaching from traditions and eyewitness accounts (Lk 1:1-4). Just as Jeremiah posited stark contrasts in his teaching, so Jesus would startle people into recognition of profound truths in the doctrine of "the two ways." This approach was articulated many times by the prophets. "Today I have set before you life and prosperity, death and doom" (Deut 30:15). The goal of human existence should be eternal life, the Kingdom of God (Lk 6:20), accepted by those who recognize the emptiness of a self-centered existence, the futility of accumulating this world's goods rather than using them to benefit those in need. One's definition of life and happiness is crucial to a person's daily choices, which form the basis for one's destiny. Divine gifts are necessary to gain the proper perspective and to respond consistently to one's calling in life. Then one's deeds will bear fruit (Lk 6:43-45).

REFLECTION

People turn to the Scriptures for solace and consolation and we are familiar with beautiful texts giving comfort to mourners and the afflicted. Perhaps some are going to be shocked on Sunday when they hear the opening sentence of the passage from Jeremiah the prophet, who taught in Jerusalem from 627 B.C. until after the city was destroyed in 586. "Cursed is the man who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh (human nature), whose heart turns away from the LORD"(17:5).

Jeremiah did not pronounce a condemnation of all human relationships, which must be founded on trust. Rather, in strong terms he drew attention to the fundamental need in all situations: a single-hearted devotion to God. The person who ignores God and thinks that all can be accomplished through human effort and alliances will miss the essential perspective to all creative activity: whatever is valuable eternally must be grounded in charity.

Without judging the eternal destiny of entrepreneurs whose life is ruined as their "empire" crumbles, one cannot but think of this misplaced energy and talent as a waste of gifts divinely bestowed for the purpose of building a world oriented toward the service of the Lord.

The link between Jeremiah's poem and Psalm 1 was noted long ago, so this gem is our response to the first reading. The Psalmist answers our query: "How does one keep the human heart steadfast in fidelity to God?" The truly blessed or happy person not only avoids bad company; the individual "delights in the Torah (Law) of the LORD and meditates on his Torah day and night" (Ps 1:2). It was from such intimacy with the heavenly Father's will that Jesus gained the profound insights that his teachings convey.

Like the prophets and psalmists, Jesus proclaimed that God would bring a reversal to human standards for evaluating happiness and success in life. The poor should indeed strive by all honest means to better their lot, so that they will sense their innate dignity. However, rather than envy the rich, they

should allow God to fill the vacuum of their lives with the divine presence. This perspective of faith will make them appreciate their intimacy with the King and share in his reign.

The last of St. Luke's beatitudes presents the paradox that Jesus' message will provoke strong negative reactions and persecution may well come upon those who live and teach his message. The pattern was known from ancient times. "Thus it was that your fathers treated the prophets" (Lk 6:23). Certainly Jeremiah was both ostracized and persecuted for his proclamation of God's Word; later tradition claimed that he was stoned to death by the rebels who dragged him off to Egypt.

Quite naturally we hope to get along with our neighbor, and not only do we want to be at peace --- we'd like to be popular! On tour during their heyday, the Beatles exulted: "We're more popular than Jesus!" People who knew the Gospel were slightly amused because the Lord never sought cheap acclaim or the "rewards" it brings. Rather, he faithfully pursued the path of fidelity to his Father's will, no matter what the cost. If we wish to share in his promise of the kingdom, we must reflect on the ways in which the Gospel contradicts aspects of our culture and then ask for the strength to be witnesses to that teaching.