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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, February 13, 2022

6 Epiphany, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Jeremiah 17:5-10](#)

[1 Corinthians 15:12-20](#)

[Luke 6:17-26](#)

[Psalm 1](#)

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So a historic figure someone almost everyone in Sonoma County has heard of is Pliny the Younger. Whether you're a fan who waits every year for the release or whether you just feel grumpy about the crowds descending on downtown, you've heard the name. The Russian River Brewing folks tend to pronounce it PLY-nee; Latin scholars and history types tend to say PLIN-nee. But however you pronounce it, Pliny the Younger was a real person, a Roman aristocrat who served as a governor in what's now Turkey just after the year 100. And it so happens he wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan that's one of the earliest mentions of early Christianity outside the New Testament itself.

Pliny wanted to check with the emperor to make sure he was doing the right thing with people who were being accused of being Christians. He writes, "When people were denounced to me as Christians, I first interrogated them. If they confessed I threatened them with punishment and asked them a second and third time, and if they persisted I had them executed. After all, whatever it may be that they believe, stubbornness and obstinacy certainly deserve to be punished." He wasn't a soft

man, this Pliny. Later in the letter he writes about how he tried to learn what Christians did in their church meetings. When ordinary interrogations weren't enough, he says, "I felt it even more necessary to learn the truth, so I tortured two female slaves whom the Christians called deacons."

There's a kind of casual cruelty about Pliny's letter. He writes with elegance and polish. He's one of the most civilized people of his day. But he thinks nothing of executing and torturing these people. And after all, from his perspective, why should he? These aren't people of any rank or position in society. Members of the lower classes, slaves ... they weren't people of importance, and their suffering had little importance. Pliny's letter seems cruel to us today partly because we have attitudes about human rights and dignity and the infinite value of every human being that would simply never have occurred to him or emperor Trajan or frankly most of his society.

There's an English historian named Tom Holland who recently wrote a book arguing that our modern ideas of rights and freedom and dignity can be traced largely to the rise of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> He's not a Christian himself; he's simply interested in the history of ideas and how it came to be that we ended up with these principles that would have seemed so startling throughout so much of human history. After all, it seems pretty clear that being rich is good and being poor is bad. Being powerful is good and being weak is bad. Being spoken well of is good and being shamed is bad. Pliny and his fellow Roman aristocrats were clear on that. Tom Holland isn't the first to suggest that Christianity played a huge role. Back in the 1800s the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was bewailing

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<sup>1</sup> *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

Christianity for messing everything up by spreading what he called a “slave morality,” a morality preoccupied with comforting the sorrowful and helping the weak instead of the simple good healthy pleasures of wealth, strength, and power.

Today’s gospel is as close as we get to a summary of that morality that Nietzsche bemoaned, Holland seems grateful for, and Pliny would have shrugged at. This passage is often called the Beatitudes, Beatitudes meaning blessings. Blessed are you if you are poor, if you are hungry, if you are weeping, if people hate you and shame you in my name. In the version of this passage in Matthew’s gospel Jesus softens things a bit by saying “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*.” Not here in Luke, where he just says “Blessed are the poor,” as in the actually poor, those who struggle to live. And also unlike Matthew’s gospel he adds a series of woes to counterbalance the blessings. Woe to you if you are rich, if you are full, if you are laughing, if people praise you. Woe to the simple good healthy pleasures of wealth, strength, and power. As Jesus points out, this message is in profound continuity with the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures before him. And even earlier, it’s in profound continuity with the God of the Exodus, whose foundational act is to set an enslaved nation free. Slave morality, indeed.

It’s as if Jesus is saying: *the things you think are good for you are actually killing you.*

Back in Pliny’s day the Romans had sophisticated water systems in their cities. They drank a lot of wine. They had sophisticated medicines and cosmetics. And one thing all those things had in common was lead. Lead could be worked easily into pipes, so it was used in plumbing. It was used in medicines and cosmetics. Powdered lead was even used to sweeten wine. Now of course lead can kill you.

Some scholars have suggested upper-class Romans were affected by widespread lead poisoning. In a way the Beatitudes are like that. These things you think make your life so sweet, Jesus says? The money, the plenty, the praise? These things you think are good for you are actually killing you.

We need to hear these words and realize who they're meant for. Here in this congregation we have a wide range of income and other kinds of privilege. Some of us have experienced what it's like to actually be hungry and not know where the next meal will come from, to not have a safe place to sleep, to be looked down on by others. If that describes some of what you are experiencing in your life today, hear Jesus' words of blessing. They are meant for you. But others of us have full pantries and rainy-day funds. We might have the ability to choose what to make for dinner tonight or whether to eat out. We might have houses we own, maybe even big ones. And if that describes some of what we are experiencing in your life today, we need to hear Jesus' words of woe. You are receiving your reward now. How will you live with these things that may actually be killing you?

It's not that we should romanticize poverty. Poverty is bad. Nor should we demonize plenty. Plenty is good. The earth's gifts are from God. What Jesus is saying is not, "Blessed are you if you are hungry, for food is bad and no one should have it." He says, "You will be filled." What Jesus is promising is a great reversal. And even though we can see signs of it here and now, Jesus is also pointing to the future, to God's future, for the time when it will all be fulfilled.

In the epistle reading we heard today, St. Paul writes to the Corinthians that "If Christ is not raised, your faith is in vain, and of all people we Christians are the most to be pitied." Sometimes people criticize people of faith for being too

preoccupied with the afterlife, or argue that believing in a future beyond death is just pie in the sky, a way of keeping people from rising up and making change in this life. It sure can be used that way. But if we're honest we have to say that God's justice can't be limited to what we see here and now. We can work and serve and struggle for a more just world today while also being inspired by the vision of what's still to come, having hope that even for those whose experience of life in this world is mostly woe there is still blessing beyond imagining to come. So Jesus' resurrection gives us hope in the next life as well as this one.

But there's more to it than that. Jesus' resurrection is itself part of the great reversal, the great transformation. If Jesus hasn't been raised, then there's no reason to think there's been any disruption in the eternal pattern where the rich prosper and the poor suffer. Jesus goes to the cross while Pilate goes to his bedchamber. But if Jesus, who became poor for us, who was hungry and thirsty and shamed and reviled by all, has been raised to God's right hand, then that's a sign that the great transformation has begun.