

SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26

TRUSTING TO ACHIEVE HAPPINESS

Once on a busy street in Oxford, England, I heard my name being called! A young man approached me from the crowd with a Malaysian colleague. Full of smiles, he introduced himself, adding I was his teacher and chaplain at the Opoku Ware Senior High School in Ghana. He had been offered a master's degree program at the Oxford University after a bachelor's degree in Malaysia. Furthermore, he would have the opportunity of taking a doctorate program at the Oxford University if things went well.

Most teachers are dedicated to their jobs. It is said the reward for the teacher is in heaven! Jessica M. Vasiliou, (2019) has observed that one needs a heart endowed with patience, understanding, passion, and courage to do what is right for the sake of their students, as well as a profound passion for teaching, even if it is exhausting. Teachers can exert a positive influence on students who describe them as "caring, motivating, compassionate and inspiring." Again, in respect to education, "teachers are a guiding light to students miracle workers when it comes to trying to get every student to pass a test" (Jessica M. Vasiliou, 2019). They produce the politicians, professionals, and entrepreneurs in the society.

Research by the 2018 Global Teacher Status Index shows that the countries where teachers are most respected and trusted are in China and Malaysia where the teaching profession is on par with physicians in whom patients place their trust. No doubt my former student, having studied in Malaysia, showered me with praises and thanked me profusely for all I did for him. I felt sincere gratitude, affection, and recognition. As we parted, perhaps never to meet this young man again, I felt happy, proud, well-appreciated, and respected. I thanked God for the positive impact I had on him and God's gift to him to listen, accept, and trust directives from his teachers. It is true that most students have trust and confidence in their teachers. The famously acclaimed adage is also true that "when you lose trust, you lose everything."

Unfortunately, however, in many countries, teachers are the least paid; now and then, they embark on protests demanding an increment in salary. Poor working conditions and low salaries are the true dilemma in this field, which governments refuse to change (Denlinger, 2002). Teaching in Zambia, for example, is generally an ill paid and often disparaged profession (Banja, 2012).

The brief encounter with the young man taught me more about trust as a two-way relationship with profound implications. As I appreciated the trust reposed on me as his teacher, I realized I had to merit his trust. I needed to create an impression that would engender students' trust by showing that I had integrity, values, and principles, and I lived by them. All this increased their confidence to trust me, although most often I hardly noticed they were observing me. The short meeting also led to my concluding that trust is of essence in relationships, and when people trust us, they are taking risks. We should not disappoint them. This is exactly what our readings tell us today.

In the first reading, Jeremiah makes a contrast between trusting in human power and trusting in the Lord. On one hand, those trusting in human strength and believing that it can ensure victory and true happiness in difficult times are like unproductive plants on barren land like the desert or lava rock or salty soil, where water and rich soil, the sources of plant growth, are usually absent. The mention of "the

desert,” or “the dry wilderness,” and “salty ground,” are symbols of evil and desolation that can inflict harm on the human being.

Trusting in the promises of God, hoping in Him, and relating prayerfully with Him makes one blessed and fortunate as a plant along a riverbank when watered throughout the year and bearing luscious fruits even when seasons change. The Old Testament is replete with instances where those in desperate desert conditions but trusting in God would produce succulent fruits. The psalmist plainly affirms this: “Happy the man who has placed his trust in the Lord.”

We must understand the context of the first reading from the Book of Jeremiah. When the powerful Babylonian empire threatened Judah, the kingdom made desperate foreign alliances with Egypt and the Northern Kingdom to confront Babylon. Jeremiah advised the religious leaders, civil leaders, and the people to trust in God and not in foreign political and military strength or alliances to protect Judah. An attempt to collaborate with foreign powers prompted the wrath of the Babylonians, who moved quickly to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, deporting the Jews into exile in Babylon.

Obviously, Jeremiah was not preaching that we should not trust or relate to one another at the human level. It was about trusting in the strength of human power and wisdom instead of God’s might, love, and mercy.

A report on the Global Peace Index (GPI) of June 2018 by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) reckoned that the world is less peaceful today than at any time in the last couple of decades. For the times the world is going through, trust is something in high demand and short supply, but if only we are relying on those in power. The number of deaths in civil wars, international wars, drug and corruption related crimes, and the index for homicide ratings have trended upwards because of mistrust leading to tensions, conflicts, and wars.

An example today is the Ukraine-Russian war, which shows how history repeats itself. Russia has nearly surrounded a sovereign country which seeks support from the West. The Prophet Jeremiah would have told the leaders and people not to trust in human power but to put their trust in God and in relationships with one another to ensure peace and harmony. In this seemingly difficult and unproductive terrain, trusting in God would yield good results: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know” (Proverbs 3:5). As history reminds us and the present shows us, putting human power over deference to God and appreciation of each other can lead to more and longer wars.

In the second reading, Paul writes to a converted pagan community about belief in Jesus’ resurrection and trusting him. By his resurrection, Jesus is Lord of the dead and the living, making us hope in our own resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:26). We must therefore acknowledge and accept him as Lord and Savior, leading us to true freedom and happiness. He is the source of life, nurturing us into people who can bear the fruits of peace and love and accept each other as the children of God.

The Gospel tells us about who Jesus is and why we must trust him. After a night’s prayerful encounter with God in the mountains, Jesus gathers his followers and selects twelve among them as apostles (Luke 6:12-16). A little downhill on a level ground in the mountainous terrain, a large crowd has gathered “from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon.” Jesus relates with them as the “Emmanuel,” (God is with us.) He appreciates their needs, empathizes with them, heals them from all kinds of physical and psychosomatic ailments, and feeds them (Matthew 14:13-21).

The people show signs of frustration in life. Life's meaning eludes them because they have mistakenly trusted their leaders who lack integrity and the alacrity to change their abject poverty. They are upset and hope for justice and peace from a caring and trusted leader. They seek a genuine way to relate with Jesus, whom many believe has the likeness of the divine. They trust Jesus to make change possible to ensure peace in their lives. And it is now that Jesus as the Master Teacher steps in. He speaks to them in a manner that is easily understood, with both kindness and authority, for the trusted. Jesus teaches that the poor will be joyful; the hungry be filled and happy; the dejected and mourning be glad; and the maltreated be hopeful. Jesus also teaches about the temptation of trusting in human strength and wisdom that has the power to bring about false gratification, which can destroy and distract us from focusing on God as the provider of true happiness.

Thus, today's readings tell us to trust and relate well with the Lord in whom we profess faith to attain blessedness and happiness. Jesus invites us to reflect on good relationships and trust at the human horizontal level as He sits among the people to teach them, as presented in the Lucan manuscript known as "The Sermon on the Plain." When we trust in God, we find peace and the paths to follow that keep us aligned with our neighbors and our leaders through respect and empathy, rather than fear and anger.

In Saint Matthew's Gospel, Jesus delivers the sermon to his disciples on the mountain, a discourse referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7). The mountain is a figure of the Biblical Mount Sinai where Moses proclaimed the Ten Commandments. Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses and mediator of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:6). He comes down from an encounter with God on the mountain to give God's Word to his disciples, separated from the throng milling around him, and sends them to the world to preach the Word (Matthew 28:16-20). What both evangelists narrate is collectively known as "the Beatitudes," centered on Jesus' message of love, mercy, and compassion as a blueprint for cordial relationships to ensure peace and harmony.

Last week, we considered the notion of relationships raising a few questions about how we regard or behave towards another as a relative, parent, or friend. We ask another consequential question today: Is absolute trust in a fellow human being possible? This is a hoary philosophical and theological question. From time immemorial, mistrust, deceit, suspicion and greed have caused the downfall of empires; enmity between ethnic groups and nations; and rifts between couples, children, and family members.

What is your relationship like with your partner in marriage? Can each of you rely on your promises to be true and trustworthy to each other? What is your relationship between you, your children, and the rest of the extended family?

What is your relationship like with your manager and coworkers?

Is your client or patient taking a tremendous risk in trusting you with his or her life?

What is the level to which the public trust our governments and civic leaders?

What is the level at which church members trust their leaders or themselves?

Is trust prevailing in these relationships because of our patience, understanding, kindness, acceptance, and forgiveness?

A Hindu philosopher, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), wrote, "Mind is not a dustbin to keep anger, hatred, and jealousy. But it is the treasure box to keep love, happiness, and sweet memories."

I admire and applaud my former student for his humility to listen, be respectful and studious, which benefited him with a scholarship for further studies. If he had been arrogant, proud, and disrespected or slighted his teachers, the vast change for a better future would have eluded him. True happiness comes through faith in God and trust Jesus, and humbly relating positively with one another, sharing God's blessings, love, and mercy with all people.

The Peace of the Lord be with You.