

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Psalm 1:1-2, 3, 4, & 6

1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20

Luke 6:17, 20-26

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

During the 1980's, pop psychology was all the rage. One approach involved asking seemingly innocuous questions, which were supposed to reveal something significant about the subject's innermost being. One question was, "If you were a body of water, what kind of body of water would you be?" As I recall, the 'right' answer was: "Like the Pacific Ocean...only deeper. Another question was, "If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?" The most famous of these questions, which during the decade penetrated from the analyst's couch to the singles bar, was, "If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?"

About the last place one would expect to encounter this question is in the Scriptures. But there it is, in our first reading today. God, through Jeremiah, is asking us what kind of tree we would prefer to be. We are offered a choice of two types of tree. We can be a barren bush in the desert, standing in a lava waste. Or we can be a tree planted by the waters, that stretches out its roots to the stream.

It isn't a difficult choice. We would all rather be like the tree planted beside a stream. The question then becomes, how can we avoid the lava flow, and secure a nice spot beside the water? Jeremiah tells us that the desert lots go to those who put their trust in human beings, and the waterfront property is given to those who trust in the Lord.

Our Responsorial Psalm uses the same imagery, of a healthy, fruitful

tree growing by running water. In the psalm, the key to achieving this happy status is to have hope in the Lord.

Implicit in both readings is the assumption that each of us has to trust somebody. Someone has to be the source of our hope. Human life, and human nature are such that we simply can't make it on our own. Our lives are often too difficult and painful, and anyway we aren't made that way. To follow the tree analogy, it's as if we all have roots. And if we are to stand, those roots have to be anchored somewhere. We need someone to be our ground, our rock.

And notice that the readings imply we have to trust someone. Someone has to be the source of our hope. Not something. However admirably things may serve to distract us from our human condition, they can never provide a foundation for our lives. The bumper sticker says, "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." But in truth shopping, or collecting, or acquiring things, can only be a Band-aid on our anxiety.

So, we have to trust someone -- to hope in someone. The psalm offers us the choice of delighting in the law of the Lord, or of following the counsel of wicked insolent sinners. It's apparent which course we are intended to choose. But Jeremiah makes a subtler point. He says we must choose between trusting in the Lord, and trusting in human beings - - not wicked human beings, or insolent human beings, but any human beings.

And that makes sense to me, because we've all known occasions when someone has had such high expectations of a marriage partner, (they were to be perfect friend, perfect lover, and source of perfect fulfillment) that when that partner failed live up to such an impossible

standard, the marriage was threatened. Only God is great enough, and perfect enough to be God for us. When we cast human beings in God's role, they inevitably fail.

We've also known occasions when someone's faith has been shattered, because some seeming paragon of religious virtue, in whom they'd placed their trust, went off the rails. We need only refer to Jesus' condemnations of the Pharisees, to be reminded that seemingly holy people aren't always what they appear to be. All the whitened sepulchers aren't in the New Testament.

Obviously, we need to trust one another in the ordinary sense of the word, but your faith, your life, must be grounded in your relationship with Christ, not someone else's. When we root our faith in another human being, rather than in Christ, we are like a cat who snuggles up to a warm automobile engine on a cold day. In the short run we are comfortable, but at any moment we may be in for an unpleasant surprise.

When we are poor, when we are hungry, when we are weeping, we learn that our hope, and our trust, are best placed in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.