

When Jesus speaks about such people who are blessed, he addresses his words to disciples who are not among the most destitute. They are the ones who have the means to be agents of divine blessing to those who are needy.

His invitation to disciples is to embrace some form of being poor, but not destitution, as an essential aspect of their commitment to Jesus. Luke shows many options for how to respond to this call to embrace poverty. Some of the fishermen and a tax collector leave behind everything to follow Jesus. Others, like Zacchaeus, give half their possessions to the poor. Many of the women put their monetary resources at the service of Jesus' mission.

When the Lord says "Blessed" are you poor, hungry and so forth, He is not saying to those who are burdened by life that their life is ideal, far from it. The Lord is teaching that there is a truth within their circumstances, a strength they do not realize. Within the tragedy of their lives there is a hidden grace. Then, it is not any sadism there.

When the Lord says, "Woe to you who are rich, popular, healthy," that does not mean either that those who have a good life are condemned. There is no fault there. He is saying that there is a hidden danger in their lives. He is warning them to be careful about their possessions.

This meaning is connected to the first reading from the prophet Jeremiah we have just heard. Jeremiah compares the just man to a tree planted beside the water and whose roots go into the stream. In a drought or heat, its leaves stay green because it is connected not to the sand but to the stream. We all know how a tree that has roots in water withstands for years. It is strong and enduring because its roots go deep beneath the surface. It survived all kinds of seasons and temperatures because its roots, its nourishment comes not from the sand or surface but from the water in the ground.

If we look for spiritual strength, eternal life, full happiness in the wealth, we will be disappointed. Wealth does not insure happiness, a faithful marriage or spiritual vitality. If we look for spiritual strength, eternal life, deep fulfillment in popularity, that does not work. People are fickle. When we do something contrary to what they want, they become enemies.

The reason the Lord speaks of "woe" to the rich, the contented, the popular is that we can deceive ourselves and not go any deeper than these things. When things break apart, we discover the truth of human life, that our real anchor hold is not material but spiritual.

Through these "blessings" and "woes" the Lord is teaching us to look at what really nourishes our soul. Do we draw our self-worth, our identity and our purpose in life from the surface or the stream?

Hear again the words of Jeremiah, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream; It fears not the heat when it comes, its leaves stay green; In the year of drought it shows no distress, but still bears fruit.