

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity 2020.

Jeremiah 17:7-10. Galatians 5:16-25. Psalm 1.
Matthew 7:13-21.

The Collect: Almighty God, the protector of all who trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal; grant this, Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

Jeremiah 17:7 'Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.'

This simple verse turns out to be quite difficult to translate from the original Hebrew! Here is one translation, from The Message (the paraphrase Bible by a Presbyterian Minister called Eugene Peterson): 'But blessed is the man who trusts me, God, the woman who sticks with God.' Contrast that with the rendering of Darby (a former Church of Ireland priest in the nineteenth century who formed a sect called the Exclusive Brethren) 'Blessed is the man that confideth in Jehovah, whose confidence Jehovah is.' The latter follows the Hebrew closely.

I think that illustrates a profound truth, namely, that people either gloss over the words of scripture, or distort them or ignore them all together. That can lead to problems. I was shocked last week when a man told me that a new piece of garden equipment had malfunctioned to the extent that he had to buy a replacement. When I asked him whether he had read through the manual, he said he had, and had searched diligently for the solution, including other sources. I believed him because I know him, and he does the same with the scriptures. But, most people don't make the effort, neither in life, nor in faith. The result of lack of effort can be negligible, comical, or catastrophic. Humans can allow disaster to fall upon them, or for it to catch up with them more slowly (like gradually heating up a frog in a jar of water). They could have avoided it.

When translating a verse, one can think about what it might be '*au contraire*'. That might clarify the argument. As it happens, a couple of verses prior to ours Jeremiah (17:5) reads: 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord.' So, the '*au contraire*' to 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,

whose trust is the Lord', is: 'cursed is the man who doesn't trust in the Lord, but in his own flesh'. Yet, that is what we most often do. It is our habit. It is ingrained in us as is the dust of the earth. We start from ourselves and work outwards. We are our own Book of Life. Unfortunately, we only have access to the abridged version, or the manual supplied by another human being whose translation skills leave a bit to be desired. We don't make the effort to put God's guidance first before resorting to our own feelings.

The difficulty of verse seven ('whose trust/confidence *is* the Lord') is that it could mean '*is*' or '*is in*' the Lord. I prefer the former. Thus, people are challenged either to put their trust in themselves... and possibly activate a curse on the outcome, or, choose to make the Lord (Yahweh/Jesus) their confidence, and be blessed. What do you think about that as a choice? What about that song well-beloved of near-atheists at their funeral: 'I did it my way'? It sounds good, but is an appalling affront to God. As St Paul says in our reading from Galatians: 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh' (5:17).

Let us sum up! Things are not quite as difficult as I may have made them.

I'm saying that we have to read scripture, indeed search scripture, to find what God is saying to our hearts and minds. But, ultimately, we mistakenly choose to put our own gloss on readings, and feel we know enough to get us through life and into heaven. We could be lucky (couldn't we)?! Yet, God knows us better than we know ourselves, and He knows the Way to eternal life better than we do. It's a narrow gate and the way is hard (Mt 7:14). Effort is needed by us to focus on the directions.

I'm also saying that we need to take a step further than Holy Scripture by inviting, and allowing, the Lord to *be* our confidence: 'whose trust *is* the Lord.' He searches our mind, and uses our flesh to bring fruit, good fruit. (Jer 17:10; Mt 13:16). But, we must also be aware that, if we depend on our own interpretation, and our own sense of direction in life *only*, then we will find it leads to destruction and bad fruit. Hard, I know, but who can contradict what the Lord teaches?

To God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost be glory now and forever. Amen.