



## No Middle Way

This column is a revised version of a homily given at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Bend on 17 February 2019.

Every day we make our way to God or we turn away from Him by choices that shape our lives toward salvation or misshape them to perdition. In today's responsorial psalm "the way of the wicked" and "the way of the just" radically diverge: the first leads to the "woes" Jesus laments in the Gospel; the second, to the blessedness He promises there. No middle way lies in between.

The "way of the wicked" the psalmist describes descends by stages into soul-devouring evil. First come bad companions who entice the unwary to follow "the counsel of the wicked" and fill his mind with bad thinking. Bad choices predictably follow, and he reaches a fork in the descending path. Cutting his ties to good advice and good friends, he now "walks in the way of sinners," lowering himself further and further down, out of reach from ideas and people that would lift him up. At the end of his downward journey he "sits in the company of the insolent," taking his place in the false fellowship of those "whose heart turns away from the Lord," as the prophet Jeremiah calls them.

In sharp contrast, when the psalmist sketches the just man, very different possibilities

emerge. His heart "delights in the Law of the Lord," and he "meditates" on it "day and night." He does not entrust his thoughts and feelings to the merciless judgement of public opinion but aligns them with the design his Creator discloses in the Law of Love. In the end "he prospers," growing in goodness "like a tree planted near running water." His life follows an upward path "and yields its fruit in due season."

Jesus Christ is the just man *par excellence*; so He speaks from personal experience about these matters, but in provocative words that must have discomforted his audience on first hearing as much as they do us today.

"Woe to you who are rich," he says, to those of us whose lives are "filled now," not with money only, but with position and possessions, with resources and opportunities, with power and influence. Counting on these worldly goods, we can "laugh now" because we're too far removed from the poor and the powerless to have any part in their abundant sorrows. But we'll come closer to them if we seek the blessings Jesus promises in the Gospel today.

He opens the gate to the way of justice with a startling benediction: "Blessed are you who are poor." When He fleshes out His meaning, we see that He models it Himself. You are "hungry now," because you consciously rely, as He always did, on the hand of your Father to provide the food you must have to sustain your life. You weep, as Jesus did over Jerusalem, at the sight of those who do not recognize the time of their Savior's visitation and so know not how to live in peace with themselves, with others, and with God.

In the new age of social media shaming one beatitude in particular may strike us to be Our Lord's most provocative promise: "Blessed are you when . . . they *exclude and insult* you . . . on account of the Son of Man." In saying this, Jesus does no more than re-phrase His invitation to take up our cross daily and follow Him. For if we do, we cannot avoid the insult and invective that rained down on the Cross Bearer to Calvary.

St. Francis de Sales understood this well. "An excessive fear of losing our good name betrays a great distrust of its foundation, which is a really good life." Therefore, we should focus on how we live our life and not on what others think of how we live it. "By resigning our reputation into the hands of God, we secure it in the best way possible," St. Francis concluded. "In the end we are only what we are in the sight of God."