

“Lord, how will you bless us?” Jeremiah 24:1-7

“After Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen, and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon, the Lord showed me this vision: behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. And the Lord said to me, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” I said, “Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.”

Then the word of the Lord came to me: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

So, dear brothers and sisters, this is the last day of this year. How was this year for you? Better than the previous one, or perhaps worse? How was it in general? What are your thoughts, your feelings, your fears, concerns, joys and hopes?

The world keeps spinning faster and faster, and not for good. Time seems to be slipping away like sand through fingers. What about your personal life, have you had more joyful moments or more distress and suffering?

What about the Church of Christ? This appears to be a season of choosing our highest allegiances. The Word, or the world. To please God or to please people. Who to follow, Christ or culture? These questions seem to be testing every church, every congregation, every individual Christian, also the LCA and all of us.

On the one hand church after church falls in line with what society demands, on the other hand, there are more and more inspiring examples of how Christians stand up for the faith they have received boldly and winsomely. And flourish by God's grace. As we recently heard from Bishop Juhana Pohjola from Finland.

This is normal. As Paul the apostle wrote: **“I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”** (1 Cor 11:18-19)

Also the gap between where society is and where the Church of Christ is and is supposed to faithfully remain seems to be widening with every year. On the one hand, what we believe and confess is understood less and less.

On the other hand, there are more and more people in our society, who are not happy with where the culture has gone and is heading, who are looking for better, more meaningful, more beautiful alternatives. But they are not here yet.

The question pops up – where is our God in all of this? Has He forgotten about us? Isn't it about time that He would remember us, as the Bible puts it? **“Then the Lord remembered His people...”**. The words of Jeremiah the prophet from today's reading bring us quite unexpected encouragement.

What was his message? It was about God's people. The Triune God had acted magnificently in their history. He had given His promise to Abraham and his descendants. Centuries later He had fulfilled those promises.

He had led Israel out of Egypt. He had given them the Promised Land. He had established His presence with them in the city of God, Jerusalem. That is where God's temple was, where He had promised to be present and to hear prayers of His people. That is where the beautiful worship took place.

God's people, God's city, God's temple, God's worship, God's promises of His presence and protection. And now, what has happened? Babylonians had conquered the Promised Land. They had breached the walls of Jerusalem.

They had plundered God's city and His temple, slaughtered His priests, dashed infants against the rocks and filled the streets with blood, they had taken away many of God's people into Babylonian exile. What to make of it? If our situation may not look too good, what about theirs? Has God forgotten them?

But then... unexpected plot twist. God's message through Jeremiah. What does it say? It is so, so contra-intuitive! Hard to believe! Doesn't make sense! In this vision, God Yahweh shows Jeremiah two baskets of figs. Ones are very good figs, like first-ripe figs, and the others are very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten.

Then the shocking surprise comes: **“Like these good figs, so I will regard as good [who?!] ... the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. [What?!] I will set my eyes on them for good.**

I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.” What! Who does He want to bless?!

Those people, who were sent into exile! But then, why did He do this to them? Why take them away? What is this about?! How to understand it? How do we interpret it, when bad things happen in our lives? How do we tend to explain them?

If we do not have a good conscience before our Lord, washed and purified by the Holy Spirit, if we feel guilty and are not fully sure about God's grace and forgiveness, we may see it as God's punishment. As God's judgment upon us.

As God's anger towards us. Or possibly we can angrily turn to others and search for someone whom we could blame. But why did God allow all of this to happen to those “very good figs”, His chosen people?

It may sound strange, but the answer is – because of love. **“For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every child whom He receives.”** (Heb 12:6) God's

people were turning away from their God, from the very source of life – just as we see it today – back into slavery to idols and He so wanted to rescue them.

Whatever happens to God's children in this life, whatever happens in your life, whatever you may need to go through, that is not a punishment, not for God's children. What happens may not be a good thing on its own. It may even be evil.

But as we know **“that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”** (Rom 8:28) Not that all things are good, no! but our God still brings good through them for His beloved. He has not forgotten you; He has not abandoned you, He never will.

Whatever happens, He intends to use that for our blessing. He wants to bless us. He desires to bless you! Remember, why did Jesus come into this world? **“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”** (John 3:17)

Jesus didn't come to judge. Not now. For that purpose, He will come later. For now, God our Father desires everyone to come to the knowledge of the truth and to be saved. He wants to set His eyes on us for our good.

He longs to plant us, to bless us, to build us up, to **“give us a heart to know that He is the Lord, and we are His own people and He is your God.”** Remember this forever, He wants to bless you! He wants to bless us!

See, very practically, we have two options, two ways to look at our lives and everything that happens. First, we can look at what is happening, as we perceive it with our senses, and then to draw conclusions – what it may tell us about our God and about His attitude towards us. This is what non-believers do.

Second, we can look at the loving heart of God our Father and at Jesus our Lord and Brother and what they have done for us, what sacrifices they have made for us, look at the cross of Jesus Christ where He went for you, and then to draw conclusion about how to see and interpret what is happening.

Otherwise put, we may start with our experience and let it shape our idea of God, or we can start with how the Triune God has revealed Himself and let His self-revelation shape how we interpret our experience.

This is what Christians do, this is how God's children see and interpret this world and everything that happens. For we know this from the Scripture, and the Holy Spirit assures you, that your God wants to bless you, always.

And the greatest of blessings with eternal consequences is to be brought into His family, to be embraced by the Father, to be united with the Triune God and then remaining in this divine fellowship, in the true faith, by God's grace.

Thus, we can see that even those times and situations which appear difficult and trying from our perspective, our Father uses for our good, to bring us closer to Him. For your ultimate good. Remember how the apostles encouraged us?

“We rejoice even in our sufferings... if now for a little while we are grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of our faith—more precious than gold... may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom 5 and 1 Peter 1)

You are God’s gold, you are God’s treasure, you are precious in His eyes, and this is why He bothers to purify us, His Church, to test us, to try us, to mould, rebuild, reshape us, so that we become more and more like His true Son Jesus Christ.

These are the last few hours in this year. People often make their New Year resolutions. To eat less, to exercise more, less screen time, more books, less work, more relationships, or maybe less wasted time and more meaningful activities, more time with loved ones, and so on.

Do you have any resolution for this next year? Don’t tell now what it is, but let me suggest one more New Year resolution for you? This one shouldn’t be that hard to keep, even if it is quite contrary to our fallen nature.

Let’s resolve in every difficult and challenging situation to ask this question: “Lord, how will you bless me? Lord, how will you bless us?” Because of your faith, we may experience uneasiness or conflicts with our relatives and friends. “Lord, how will you bless us?” Perhaps, you want us to listen to you more attentively, to learn more, to pray more for the people in our life, to practice confessing our faith winsomely.

Our congregations are small, “Lord, how will you bless us?” Perhaps, you want to form us into a friendly and caring community where everyone can experience God’s love. We may not have enough resources, “Lord how will you bless us?” Perhaps, you want to make us more generous with our time, with our resources.

“Lord, our church is on the brink of separation, how will you bless us?” Perhaps, you want to help us to recognize what is truly important, what is worth dying for. Perhaps, you want to bring us together with like-minded passionate Christians in Australia and abroad, perhaps, you want to use us to create something beautiful, to preserve and share the life-giving Gospel for generations to come.

“Lord, we are uncertain about our future, how will you bless us?” Perhaps, you will teach us to trust you with our whole hearts and joyfully rely on you alone. Let us learn to trust that God can bless us through anything that happens in our lives! Let us learn to see everything in our lives as being under control of our loving and affectionate Father, who longs to bless you.

I pray today that the Holy Spirit helps us to keep this New Year’s resolution, so that every day of your lives is filled with divine joy and hope and gratitude for everything that our Lord does for us. Whatever happens.

So that every day we can exclaim together with multitudes of God’s saints from every nation and language and tribe: **“Our Lord is good, His blessings are abundant, and His grace and mercy and His steadfast love endures forever and ever!”** Glory be to God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit! Amen.