



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the priests in our diocese, the very Reverend Phil Dinwiddie, who's the rector of Saint James Episcopal Church in the very scenic Grosse Ile, this past week at the clergy call with the bishops, he presented a document for the clergy to help us on using artificial intelligence. So I am this very, very, very, very slow adopter of AI. I'm a bit of a skeptic and I was actually really grateful. He did a lot of legwork for us, and he's an amazing priest. So I really value his vision. And so what he said is that we should look at AI like it's our very own personal assistant who's done all the reading and all the checking and has all the answers that we need, and we just need to know how to ask the right questions. And so he encouraged us to ask really sophisticated and difficult questions, and then subsequent and clarifying questions in order to engender the best use of AI.

Well, this sermon gave me a chance to do that because I was really intrigued by a verse that shows up in our 1 Corinthians text. This is 1 Corinthians 15, and it's part of the letter that Paul writes to the Corinthian church. The people in Corinth have been taught by Paul all about Jesus Christ and then they're trying to kind of grapple with it and understand and metabolize everything that he said to them. And he told them, you know, Jesus died on the Cross and then God raised Jesus from the dead, and that we too will be raised from the dead.

But Paul finds out that some in the church, they don't believe in the resurrection of the dead, and this sends Paul into a conniption. How can you say there's no resurrection of the dead? He asks. If there's no resurrection from the dead, then Christ was not raised from the dead. And this whole idea that Christ's death on the Cross on Good Friday and His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday proves God's never ending and always there, care, and love for us. If there's no resurrection – and then here's the verse – “Then your faith is futile.”

And I thought, my goodness, that's a really powerful sentiment: having a faith that is pointless, without purpose, putting your trust in something that turns out simply not to be true. Paul said, indeed, if there's no resurrection of the dead, then our very faith in God is actually without merit. If God's not going to save us from death, then you know what? We Christians, we're the most to be pitied 'cause we believe that. For Paul, the crux of the faith that we have is that God raises people

from the dead and began with Jesus Christ. Everything hinges on this belief for Paul, and if we are not resurrected from the dead to new life, then to Paul, everything in the Christian faith crumbles.

Now, it got me thinking just how powerful faith is and how what we believe really affects how we live and what happens if what you believe isn't true? What are some ways that people over the centuries have put their trust in something and it turned out not to be true? Well, here's where AI comes in. So I asked what I deemed to be a fairly complex question to AI, and I got the responses. I'm going to quote you exactly what AI said to me. All right?

So here's my question. I asked AI, can you give me some examples of having a futile faith in something other than a theological doctrine, like for example, believing in the Easter Bunny, but way more sophisticated than that? And she responded. Here's what she said. Here are some sophisticated examples of misplaced or futile faith in non-theological areas. Number one, the myth of meritocracy. The myth of meritocracy is the belief that we live in a pure meritocracy where success is determined solely by talent, hard work, and personal choices. This faith persists despite overwhelming evidence that structural factors (socioeconomic status at birth, race, gender, wealth, inheritance, social connections, et cetera) play massive roles in determining life outcomes. That's what she said.

Here's number two, the techno utopian singularity. So this is the quasi-religious faith that technological advancement will inevitably solve all human problems. This belief system, popular among some Silicon Valley elites, places faith in artificial super intelligence that will supposedly solve climate change, disease, poverty, and even death itself. I just thought that was delightful. Here was AI warning me about the futility of believing in AI. So I thought, oh my gosh, I'm going to keep at this. So I asked my subsequent and clarifying question. I said, those are way too sophisticated. How about something more concrete? And she responded with these actually very devastating ways that people's faith was misplaced.

Number one, asbestos. So there was this widespread faith in asbestos as being this miracle building material, and it was used extensively in construction, in ship building and manufacturing from the 1900s all the way to the 1970s and it turned out to be deadly. It led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and billions of dollars of remediation.

Number two, thalidomide as a safe morning sickness treatment. So this happened in the late 50s and the early 60s that doctors from all over the world internationally and pregnant women believed that thalidomide was the safe treatment for morning sickness. It was never tested. It was just administered. It turned out to be devastating. It killed hundreds and hundreds of children.

Children were born with deformities and all kinds of problems. And the problem was so big worldwide that it is actually considered one of the worst medical disasters in history.

So I told Al, thank you, but these ways of believing are just way too heavy and tragic. I need something less serious that people put their faith in. And so she said, diet fads, and those miracle creams that you use to make you look younger, and I thought, whoops, I got a whole shelf full of those. What we believe matters. I bring this to your attention because I stand before you as someone who believes in Jesus Christ, and this belief has definitely affected my whole life. And I agree with Paul's sentiment, if God is not who I think God is, then my faith has been in vain and the whole way that I live my life is a waste.

But what if what I believe is true? I want to tell you three things that I teased out from the readings from today that I believe. And I offer these as an example, and I trust you to do your own work and figure out what you believe and what you don't believe. But as for me, these are the three things I believe. I believe in the resurrection of the dead. I believe, therefore, that the judgment from God is not about condemnation, but it is about mercy. And I believe that every human being on this earth is blessed not because of their actions or their work, but because Jesus Christ blesses us all. And I believe these things because like you, I start with Jesus. And I don't start with Jesus at His incarnation, and I don't look at Jesus' life, and I don't even look at Jesus on the Cross. I begin with Jesus at the resurrection.

One of my favorite New Testament professors in seminary once said that the whole of the New Testament seeks to address the answer to one central question: why did God raise Jesus Christ from the dead? Without the resurrection, the Christian faith, it's just really just a bunch of interesting aphorisms by a charismatic spokesperson. But because Jesus was raised from the dead, everything is different. We see that God does not let death have the final say in our lives. Because Christ was raised from the dead, Paul believes that this is God's way of saying all of us will be raised from the dead to new life.

And his proof, it's himself. Paul persecuted Christians and caused them to be murdered. And he of all people, therefore, was worthy of condemnation, and yet it was he who believed that God would raise him from the dead to new life. When you and I believe in the resurrection of the dead, we actually are believing that each human being God has made is given the gift of abundant life today and always. And when we start there, when we believe that everyone will be raised to a new life of mercy and grace, when we start there, everything changes. Start at the end, my friends, so that you can have a new beginning.

And so it was with this lens of the resurrection of the dead, that God is indeed going to raise all of us to new life, that I actually read Luke's gospel for today. So in Luke's gospel, Jesus is gathering all the apostles, the disciples, and the crowds

on a plane. And he says to all of them, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh. But woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

I don't know about you, but when I hear these woes, I have this knee-jerk response, uh-oh, because those woes seem to be intended for me and all of us who have situated ourselves in this life with some semblance of security and safety and comfort. And it sounds like Jesus is warning us with a promise of judgment against us and a prediction of a reversal of fortune for us, and a leveling of the playing field.

But I know Jesus, and so do you. This past weekend, 52 of the women who are associated with Christ Church Cranbrook went on a retreat, and the theme for our retreat was "Fear not." We reminded each other to be brave and not to be afraid of things that make us scared because why? God is with us always, no matter what is happening, what road we take, no matter whether we stay or we go, or we begin again, Jesus is with us in all of our storms. Jesus is with us in all of our moments of darkness. Jesus is with us even in our own deepest delusions when we are our worst possible selves.

Now if God is with us and tells us not to live in fear, does it make any sense that then God could turn around and be the source of our fear in judgment? So then what is the meaning of these blessings and these woes? Lucky for us, we have a seminary professor as our rector. Whenever I have problems with these pernicious passages, I call Father Bill. I'm like, Father Bill, what does Jesus mean by these woes to those of us who are comfortable and rich? And so beautifully and succinctly, he said, these are not prescriptive, they are predictive. They describe the way things go. In other words, blessings happen when you are poor. Woes happen to you when you are rich.

Now why would Jesus want to let the people who gathered that day on the plain know that? Because Jesus, remember, He's not interested in judgment. He is interested in mercy. So I went back to that passage in the Gospel of Luke and I discovered something. When Jesus has gathered everyone, there's actually like this multitude of people who have come to see Jesus. And when the Bible says multitude, you and I need to think stampede. It's a melee, it's a crush. There are so many people and all of these people have one thing that they want to do. They want to touch this one man, because when they touch Him, something happens, they're healed. And the scriptures say all in the crowd were trying to touch him for power came out of him and healed all of them.

And I began to imagine what this must have been like when the actual people who were actually getting close to Jesus began to be transformed. Their mental

illnesses would go away and they could actually be themselves again, and they cried out for joy. Those with physical deformities were all of a sudden amazingly healed right then and there. And the people behind them were like, let me get to Him. Let me get to Him because I have something that needs to be fixed. And it's just crazy.

And Jesus quiets all of them down and He tells them, you're trying to be healed. You think if I could just touch Him, everything will change for me. If I could just be healed by Him, my life will be better. If this one thing were fixed, I can live, and Jesus says the exact opposite to them: your life, no matter the circumstances, does not require what you think in order to be blessed. Even the poor, even the hungry, even those of us who are crying are blessed. Even the rich, even the satiated, even those who are laughing will experience woes. This is not about a reversal of fortune. This is about revisioning the judgment of God. Our actions do not determine whether we are blessed or whether we are cursed. Our life is blessed in all circumstances.

Even Paul who murdered Christians believed this, and he believed this because Jesus came to tell us that any life that is measured on a scale of any sort to determine whether it's merited or good, or evil, or wicked or righteous. Any kind of scale like that misses what the judgment about Jesus Christ is about. Because here's the good news: with Jesus Christ, there is no scale. All of us are blessed by God, not by our actions, but because of God. And this is really important to me for this reason. If there's no judgment based on actions or deeds, but judgment is God's mercy shown to me when I stand before God, then who am I to be critical of others? It means I need to take a different stance with those whom I deem unworthy, or I actually believe merit harsh judgment. I am invited to adopt an outlook God has to show mercy and practice loving kindness, which by the way is remarkably harder than pronouncing judgment on others and being critical of others.

But you know what? God raised Jesus from the dead. This plan has already begun, so I am going to believe this and I am going to live my life changing my judgment to mercy. And so I invite you all. Will you join me? Will you believe in the resurrection of the dead? And because you believe in the resurrection of the dead, will you then believe that judgment is not about condemnation, but judgment is about mercy? And because you believe judgment is about mercy, will you believe that every human being on this earth is blessed no matter what their actions are? Because Christ blesses them.

[We will!]

Amen. I'm not done yet. All right. I do want to end this sermon, so let me end it with this. I want to address the chasm between the poor and the rich. It's very deep and it's very wide. In the past five days, this church received four different

phone calls from people who were at their wits' end and needed assistance to have the most basic needs met – food, shelter. The mission and outreach committee of this church has expressed deep concern about the precarity that our community partners are facing with the possible cuts in federal spending for basic programs for the poor. Being poor right now is frightening because all of those safety nets, they're all disappearing in a really alarming rate.

To those of us who are rich, and that's me, what a time to be a Christian and to have means. For such a time as this, we know that God has given us hearts of generosity and hearts of mercy so that we can lift up our fellow human beings who are afraid right now for their lives and for their own wellbeing. And what we rich are definitely not going to do is ignore the cries of the poor because we are going to share what has brought us peace, our resources, and our wealth given to us by God. And when we share, we're participating in the wideness of God's mercy to all.

And you know what? At the resurrection of the dead, when we appear before the poor who have suffered in this life, they're going to welcome us with open arms in that next life and they're going to say to us, blessed are you who are rich, for you practiced God's mercy and shared with me. And let me tell you, there is no way that you'll ever have a faith that is futile if that's what you believe.

Amen.