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Epiphany 6, 14 February 2010

Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

This weekend's reading from Jeremiah is part of a consistent biblical tradition that our trust should be directed towards God and not towards human strength. It presents an image of the faithful being unshaken in the greatest of disaster, whilst those who trust in human strength become fearful when things go awry. As St. Augustine of Hippo said – my soul will not rest till it rests in God. The picture presented in this section of Jeremiah is of the restlessness of the one who does not trust in God.

But what is the basis of this trust? For Jeremiah, as for all the writers of the Scriptures, it is based in two things the promise of God and God's actions in the past. Since it is part of the faith to believe that God is faithful then we can trust that what God has done in the past will happen again. If God has cared for God's people in the past, then this will be the case now and into the future. If God has promised something then it is completely reliable for God is faithful.

So the first and most basic question, if this trust which brings peace and tranquillity to the faithful of the human race is to be real in our lives, is do we believe in the faithfulness of God? Without that belief the rest makes no sense.

Then next is another question. Is it really true that those who trust in human strength become frantic and anxious? I have known many people who are always concerned to position themselves for the next stage in their lives, who look to image as crucial to their lives. What happens when these plans do not materialize? How do they explain and cope with things not turning out as they had hoped and worked for? Depression and disillusionment are not uncommon. Not universal, but not uncommon. Our plans based on our own strength are fragile.

What then do belief in the faithfulness of God and the trust in God that flows from this belief do to these situations in our lives? It helps us to recognize that our inability to always control the outcomes of our lives is not personally destructive. Even if things go not as we would wish, in fact even if they go really bad, God remains faithful to us and continues to be with us to comfort in pain and guide to the future.

Yet sometimes this can seem discouraging. We don't always manage not to get anxious and fearful for the future, sometimes things do overwhelm us. Does this mean our faith is not strong enough? No, it points to the reality that as human beings we can never fully appreciate who God is for us, we gain glimpses, we need reminding. And because we are asked to place our faith in something we cannot see, we doubt. Then we can remind ourselves of passages such as these, and pray a prayer from the Christian Scripture  
I believe, help my unbelief.

But the security of our faith remains – that even in these moments of pain and doubt – we can cry out to God believing even as we struggle to believe, and knowing even as we are confused, that God will comfort and strengthen us. It is this which these words of Jeremiah reassure us – that even as we feel ourselves failing in strength we can call out to God who will come to our aid.