

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Jeremiah 38:4-6. 8-10 / Luke 12:49-53)
18.08.2019

Jeremiah's experience in today's first reading is not that far removed from the experience of many people in the life of the Church over the centuries. Various prophetic figures who were raised up to speak to God's people across the ages have gone through something of what Jeremiah went through in his day.

Jeremiah is remembered as one who dared to name and take a stand against the hypocrisy and corruption he witnessed among many who claimed to speak in God's name. Fearlessly, he took on so-called prophets, priests and government officials alike. He dared to go against the party line that contented itself to state that *all is well...* even at those times when clearly things were far from well. Jeremiah was realistic enough to recognise how the situation could go from bad to worse and he wasn't shy about pointing this out. Quite often when things are evidently going awry, well-meaning voices will proclaim that they can only get better. But things can, and, in fact, they sometimes do, go from bad to worse. Jeremiah didn't deny this possibility; he put the people of his day on their guard in this respect.

It would be interesting to hear Jeremiah's *take* on life in the Church today and also to hear his opinion on some of the policies being pursued by governments of our world at this time of profound political crisis, not to say absolute chaos in so many places and in various domains. I was tempted to give some specific examples of certain situations I could imagine Jeremiah addressing today, but I have decided to refrain from doing so. You are all well enough aware of the deep divisions within the Roman Catholic Church and between the Churches, as well as the madness we find ourselves caught up in because of the folly of certain governments' policies in more than one country of our world – which could legitimately be regarded as a world is on the brink of chaos.

Let's just stay with Jeremiah's own period of history.

Jeremiah dared to point out to those in political responsibility in his day that the nation faced destruction as a consequence of the policies being pursued by its leaders. He also dared to make it clear to the religious authorities of the day that they were not being true to the demands God's word made upon them. He drew attention to the spiritual decline to be evidenced among God's people.

The prophet warned against the responses being proffered on both fronts: quick-fix political solutions and cosmetic window-dressed religion.

Jeremiah criticised those in the political sphere who imagined that their rhetoric alone was what was needed. He made it clear that the approach proposed by the political leaders of the day was not for the good of the people.

He also challenged those in the religious domain who were satisfying themselves to get archaic rubrics right, thinking that exterior form alone mattered. He challenged them to listen to what God was saying to them in the present day and age and to do what was pleasing to Him in the real circumstances they found themselves in – with the demands these circumstances made upon them.

In regard to both parties Jeremiah insisted that what was required of them was integrity and attention to people's real plight. He saw this was being ignored in his day as we might see this being the case in our own.

Jeremiah's message, for all his strength of conviction, was one that few accepted or believed in. The prophet was largely ignored. The establishment's so-called *prophets and priests who plied their trade throughout the land*, peddling false religion and bolstering political injustice, were heeded and welcomed while Jeremiah found himself ostracised. The people preferred to listen to those who predicted what they wanted to hear. They revelled in vain promises of a rosy future. The message of those in power, albeit that they were deceiving the people, sounded sweeter to the ears of the populace than did the voice of reason – and, indeed, the voice of God. Remember Jeremiah spoke, not in his own name, but, in God's holy name – as every true prophet does.

During his years of ministry Jeremiah suffered intense persecution. We see an example of this where we meet him in the text read this morning. We are shown here how the king's leading men spoke to the king in complaint, saying: *Let Jeremiah be put to death, for he is unquestionably disheartening the remaining soldiers in the city, and all the people too, by speaking as he does*. To this advice they added the lie of lies. Jeremiah's critics, who were far from concerned for the people, dared to say of him: *This fellow does not have the welfare of this people at heart*. The situation was a tragic one. King Zedekiah recognised it as such when he avowed to those putting pressure upon him to ignore Jeremiah and even do him harm: *The king is powerless against you*. The bully boys were left free to have their field day. They could do as they pleased. At his own admission, not even the king himself could stop them. In the dilemma the nation was in, Jeremiah gave King Zedekiah clear directions from God, but, unfortunately, the king was too insecure to follow the prophet's advice. As a result of pressure placed upon the king, Jeremiah was thrown into the well of Prince Malchiah. We read: *There was no water in the well, only mud... and into the mud Jeremiah sank*. Talk about *being put in it*, as we say! Jeremiah was *put in it* to up to over his head! Jeremiah was *plunged into the depths*. Other passages of Scripture which describe like experiences come to mind. We can think of the godly prophet's experience in the light of verses from the psalms such as those which speak of being *plunged into the depths of distress... bogged down in the miry clay*. And yet, even there, the Lord kept Jeremiah's *foot steadfast, set upon a rock... holding him by his right hand*.

During his years of ministry, Jeremiah was to know various moments like the one described into today's first reading. His experience in the well of Prince Malchiah was not a once-off experience of ill treatment. At other times over the years he suffered intense persecution: he was thrown into a dungeon; he was beaten; he was put in stocks; he was threatened and almost killed. Extra-biblical tradition says that at the end he was stoned to death.

We might well ask: what was it that permitted Jeremiah to keep on going in and through all the trials he endured? Was it just his human strength and stamina – not to say, his stubbornness?

While not doubting that the mature Jeremiah had become a stronger character than the younger Jeremiah whose words at the outset of his Book of Prophecy you may recall, where he said of himself that he was timid and unready for the mission confided to him, I think it is important for us to recognise that what really kept Jeremiah going in and through all his hardships was God's grace. He endured all the injustices and false accusations levelled against him, all the physical, emotional and psychological fatigue he knew, all the temptations to despair he managed to overcome, by the fact that he was a man of prayer. Jeremiah was someone with a deep spirituality. He drew strength from the Spirit.

Like every true prophet, Jeremiah was, at one and the same time, a man of God and a man of the people. He was not someone who set out to be a rabble-rouser. He did not set himself up as a sharp-tongued and loud-mouthed critic with the goal to incite revolt. He did not satisfy himself to adopt the role of a pessimistic insinuator who sowed seeds of doubt in a bid to stir up trouble for the religious and political authorities of the day. Primarily what Jeremiah sought to do was to bring a word from God into the situations confronting the nation and the people of faith who were part of it. Jeremiah was a true prophet, God's spokesperson, a godly man. He spoke the truth as he saw it, and he did so in God's name – that's to say, out of love. Despite the opposition he faced, Jeremiah remained firm in his God-given convictions. He remained true to the insights and to the message the Lord gave him to relay to those whom he addressed. What he shared with his listeners was not just his personal point of view, but what he believed to be God's perspective on things.

Jeremiah confronted those who were in denial. He challenged them to admit to the reality of their situation, to own up to their failures and to trust in God's help in doing so. He pleaded with them to change their ways, to convert their lives, to get things right. For Jeremiah, the solution was not to resort to that other form of denial which so many are tempted to have recourse to in times of crisis: namely, spiritual escapism. For Jeremiah the answer was not to encourage people to pursue a path of reverie, but to invite them to face up to and deal with the stark realities facing them in their lives.

There is always a temptation for those who see that things are going wrong within themselves or around them, be that in the community of faith or in society, to resort to a vision that offers a distraction from reality rather than helps them confront it. We see this phenomenon at work in today's world... and, to begin with, in certain Church circles.

Lest I give the wrong impression, let me insist that while Jeremiah wasn't afraid to criticise what he witnessed to be going on around him, he did not content himself simply to utter words of discouragement.

Ultimately, Jeremiah proclaimed a very positive message; his final word was one of hope. Jeremiah proclaimed hope despite disaster; even hope in disaster. While never denying the hardships that were to befall the people and presenting the difficult times they were traversing as needing to be worked through courageously, what Jeremiah foresaw and foretold as the ultimate goal for God's People was deliverance, salvation, true peace: *Shalom*, fullness of well-being. He spoke very movingly of a *new beginning, a fresh contract, a renewed covenant*. Although we don't read these words in the liturgy today, I would present an unbalanced picture of Jeremiah if I didn't quote them. So let me share with you Jeremiah's ultimate *take* on everything: *It is the Lord who speaks. I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.*

Notwithstanding his own painful experience and everything that he named so starkly in his prophecies, pointing out to the religious and political leaders of his day what he saw as their weaknesses and deception, Jeremiah's message was that if only the people would align themselves to God's will, if only they would see things in God's light and do as He, the Lord, would have them do, then all would be well for them.

All this shows us that no matter how head-on God confronts us, no matter how clearly He flags up the truth of our situation to us – sometimes rather forcefully drawing to our attention the mess we are in – the Lord always promises us a way out, a way through, a way forward.

This is important for us to hear, even as we listen to today's gospel passage in which Jesus Himself can take us aback with His blunt naming of the reality of divisions which can and do exist between us.

If today's gospel speaks of the inevitable passages through division which are part of our Christian experience – not only division in regard to those who are from outside the Church, but also divisions within our Church families – this must not be taken as Christ's last word. Jesus' final prayer, His ultimate hope and great trust for His disciples and for the world, in which the disciples are called to bear witness to the gospel, is that *all may be one*. We are called to be one over and beyond all that can sometimes separate us and hold us apart.

In the world and in the Church, and between the Churches, the big challenge is to live with our differences. It is to come to recognise what the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks calls in a book title *The Dignity of Difference*. We are called to see the possibility of dignity (and I would add of beauty) that difference brings rather than obsess over its potential threat. To quote Lord Jonathan Sacks: *In our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged not threatened by difference*.

At this grave moment in the history of this island, indeed, these islands and beyond them, that of the wider European community, and, further still, beyond that, in the vast wide world, we must learn to feel *enlarged and not threatened by difference*.

As Church, called to be *humanity reconciled*, the same must be true for us Christians and it should be evidenced in the way we relate to each other. We are called *to be one so that the world may believe*. We must strive to come to that unity of which we are meant to be a living testimony.

In our bitterly divided world and in our badly battered and bruised Church/Churches, we need a word of hope today: a hope that is well-founded; one built on love and mutual respect, not based on fear and mutual suspicion.

Since we have concentrated our attention on Jeremiah's message, let me leave the last words of this reflection to him. I quote from Jeremiah 29: *Do not listen to the false prophets who are there among you to fool you. Do not listen to the dreams that they invent... For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil. To give you a future and a hope*. Jeremiah tells the people of his day what they can do; he tells us what we can do... even as we feel helpless, powerless: pray! Jeremiah assures us on the Lord's behalf: *When you pray, I will listen*.

The world and the Church really do stand in need of our prayer at this time of crisis on so many fronts. The prayer I am speaking of here is not that of the kind that those who advocate spiritual escapism uphold. I am talking of prayer rooted in reality and want to stress the importance of our daring to live genuine spiritual combat in prayer. May we hold the world and the Church upon our hearts in fervent prayer. May our prayer be unceasing, day and night, until the Lord give answer to the pleas we bring before Him that all may be well in the end.

Amen!