

20th Sunday Ordinary Time

August 17-18, 2013

Readings: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

In today's readings, we gain a rare glimpse into the steep cost of following the Lord when encounter the prophet Jeremiah, a man literally at the end of a rope. We encounter him as he is being lowered by ropes to the bottom of a dingy, damp and muddy cistern. This is how much others thought of his prophecies. If the plan had gone through, I suspect we would have had one less book of the Bible. But in the mysterious providence of God his life was preserved, and by means of a most unlikely source, a Gentile from Ethiopia. And we are the beneficiaries by means of one of the most powerful books in all of the Old Testament.

The Judean army in Israel had gone to war with Egypt against the Babylonians, and it was not going well. The prophet Jeremiah was encouraging the Jews to surrender. Obviously this meant the end for the King and so we can understand why the message was unwelcome. Jeremiah believed that the Jews needed an entirely new start because their kingdom had rotted from within. Real reform would only happen with a radical reformulation of the Jewish religious and civil structures. In a drastic move, he was encouraging the Jews to go into exile in order to regroup.

Jeremiah annoyed King Zedekiah to no end. The King viewed his prophecies with utter disdain, seeing them as demoralizing to the remaining soldiers who fought in the war. For his part, Jeremiah was frustrated. His message, given in truth, was not well received; thus, he was despised and punished. His advice was shunned. Jeremiah felt utterly used and useless. Several high-ranking officials persuaded King Zedekiah to have Jeremiah killed. Thus he was thrown into a muddy cistern in order to die from a lack of water and food.

The cistern was a “well-like” structure used to capture rainwater during the rainy season in order to store it up for use later, during the drought. They were often deep and cavernous, and as a result quite dangerous. Thankfully, the prophet had one sympathizer in the court, the Ethiopian Ebed-melech, an official at the palace of king Zedekiah. Hardly a household name in the Bible, he facilitated Jeremiah’s rescue, and in a little detail left out of today’s passage for the sake of brevity, he even gave him rags to wrap around the rope he used to pull him out of the cistern to protect him from the rope burn.

Can we relate to Ebed-melech in any way? Can you think of a time in your life when you have stood up for what is right even when it meant risk? Have you spoken up in defense of someone, even when you knew it might make you unpopular? Have you interceded for someone, perhaps even risking your own standing with a person of influence? Ebed-melech did all these things.

The king relented and accepted his plea on behalf of Jeremiah. Through Jeremiah, the Lord vowed to protect Ebed-Melech, both from the Babylonians and from his Jewish opponents. His situation is reminiscent of that of Rahab, whose unusual faithfulness to God and courageous service to him led to her being spared when the city of Jericho was destroyed (Joshua 2, 6). God’s will was carried out in some cases by means of Gentiles, non-Jews, whose integrity made the difference.

The reality is that most people do not like being challenged, including us priests. They much prefer to be comforted. But we all need to be challenged, lest we become too comfortable with the status quo. If we recoil the first time we hear a challenging message, are we really able to say that we are open to God’s Word? If the Gospel does not challenge you, please read it again.

The demands of the Gospel force us to make some fundamental choices as we confront our dominant culture. I fear that our faith is being cast as the hindrance to progress. Let me list some examples, even if they do not rise to the level of Jeremiah.

(1) The obligation to attend Sunday Mass is a serious one. More and more, people must make choices because it is increasingly difficult to find time for Sunday Mass amidst myriad work responsibilities, the increase in the number of tournaments and Sunday activities, and people's apparent need to stay busy 24/7.

(2) Observant Catholics are being put into situations in which they feel as though they must check their own convictions at the door when they are invited to weddings of friends, family or co-workers that involve Catholics being married outside of the sacrament of matrimony, or now more recently, being asked to attend civilly recognized same-sex unions. They acquiesce because they do not want to be cast off as old-fashioned or worse yet bigoted. Their deeply held convictions about the nature of marriage are under subtle attack, and frankly, they're just tired.

(3) Parents sense the displeasure of their children when they do not allow them to have or to do what so many other parents appear to be allowing their teenagers to have or to do. Parents used to be able to count on a majority of parents holding fast to a common approach to parenting, including curfews and the insistence upon supervised activities. That seems to be fading. These parents feel out of step with the majority.

Today's readings are a stark reminder to us that divisions, while painful, are unavoidable. We do not seek them, nor do we ever rejoice in them. But when faced with a choice, let us not fear to make the right one, even when it may cause pain or division.