

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Jeremiah 20:10-13 / Matthew 10:26-33)  
21.06.2020

*Do not be afraid.*

Those words which are repeated more than once in today's Gospel passage are words we are called to hear and take to heart. We are invited to be attentive to their message at each step of life's journey, but especially at those moments when our lives take on difficult twists and turns. If there is no need for us to be afraid, this is because the Lord is true to His promise to be with us always, through thick and thin. It is so important for us to recall that the Lord is not only beside us, surrounding us as a protective shield, but that He has chosen to make His home in our hearts. Christ's presence in the depths of our being is a powerful source of courage; it gives us inner strength.

Today's first reading reminds us that those of us who are trying to live our lives for God won't always find life easy. Like Jeremiah, whom we meet at a time when so many were disparaging and denouncing him, seeking to intimidate and terrorise him, wanting to pull him down and trample him underfoot, on occasion, we may find ourselves coming under attack. Experience will have shown us how at certain moments we can be subjected to some people's contrived misrepresentations of our position. This in turn can lead others to draw forth unfounded conclusions in our regard, based on a basic misunderstanding of who truly are and what our true stance is. There are times when opponents can set out to sow seeds of doubt which cause confusion all around us; they may seek to malign us and they can succeed in doing so. This can cause us great harm.

Should we really be so surprised that it is so? Christ warned us that as it was for Him, so it will be for us. *The servant is not greater than the Master.* Given that our Lord and Master was treated in unfair ways (something Jesus refers to in Matthew 10:24 and John 15:20), it is not really that strange that we will sometimes meet with unfairness and even come up against profound injustices. Those configured to Christ frequently receive the same treatment as their Lord. But, as Jesus promised earlier on in Matthew's Gospel account – in the great Beatitude Saying found in Matthew 5:11-12, those who find themselves maligned and abused will receive a tremendous reward. That being said, in the meantime, they have to live with the pain and distress caused by the wrong done to them.

It is very important for their spiritual, mental, emotional and even their physical health and well-being, that those who find themselves under great pressure, and, as a result, feel hemmed in on every side (like Jeremiah in today's first reading), dare to acknowledge honestly what they are experiencing in all that they are being forced to endure.

I take great consolation from the fact that Jeremiah expressed himself before the Lord in a *no holds barred* kind of way. It seems to me that the beauty of the Jeremiah's relationship with the Lord lay in the evident freedom of exchange he enjoyed with God. Jeremiah felt free enough to open up his heart, to question and to lament. He didn't shy away from recognising the acuteness of his pain, clearly articulating for himself and before God what he perceived to be the unfairness of his situation. This was actually quite salutary for him. As a result, Jeremiah held himself back from being completely devastated by what befell him. He certainly resisted what can be a temptation for many of us when we traverse painful situations: the temptation to given in to self-doubt to the point where we self-destruct. This happens when we allow others to impact us to such an extent that we are pulled down, caught between the external pressures to which we are subjected and our own reaction to them. We should avoid doing our enemies work for them by giving in to their will of destruction upon us,

destroying ourselves without them having the bother of becoming too closely involved in the process. When people set out to make us suffer, we must be careful not to play into their hands or fall into the traps they set before us in their bid to ensnare us. Jeremiah may have felt disheartened and distressed – *down under it*, as we say colloquially – but he did not allow himself to get stuck there. He realised that he had to speak to the Lord about what he was going through. Jeremiah grasped that the Lord understands and welcomes an honest expression of all the emotions that can inhabit the human heart. He knew that God doesn't just tolerate our feelings, but that He truly respects them. During the years of ministry in which he suffered hardship, contradiction, and even persecution, Jeremiah dared to articulate not only his hurt and pain, but also his confidence and trust in God. The prophet was not afraid to weep when he felt saddened. He did not shy away from expressing the anguish and the anger he felt on occasion. He gave voice to his discouragement when he was disheartened. He owned up to his loneliness and his pain. These are all emotions, sentiments, states of soul, we can be subject to at times. We shouldn't be afraid to admit that there are painful feelings – what we might call ugly feelings – that can arise within our hearts at certain moments. The challenge, of course, is not to become so confused by them as to get lost in them. We are called to become free of them. It is for this reason we have to acknowledge them: in order to be freed from their grip upon us. We have to ask the Lord our God to take them away from us and allow Him to do so. Like Jeremiah, we are called to hope. The New Testament writer, Paul, tells us that we must *hope against all hope*. The call addressed to us is to hold firm in our hearts trust in the divine promise which Jeremiah echoed: *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.* These words are as true for us as they were for those to whom Jeremiah first conveyed them. They are true even for those for whom they don't seem to be fulfilled. Saying that, I think of those people who take leave of this life apparent failures in the eyes of all, certainly from this world's perspective. Both Jeremiah's and Jesus' story are remembered today as great success stories, but we should recall that they did not appear as such at the time of their passing from this world's view.

What was particularly important for Jeremiah's well-being was that in the midst of His suffering he had recourse to praise. He dared to praise God even things were at their worst for him. Halfway through today's first reading we are given to see that Jeremiah took heart even in the midst of woe. He declared: *The Lord is at my side, a mighty hero.* We are shown at this point how he had recourse to praise. The section from Jeremiah 20 proposed for our meditation ends with words of exultant jubilation: *Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord, for He has delivered the soul of the needy from the hands of evil men.*

In our moments of trial, in those hours of our lives when troubles abound, how important it is for our well-being that we think positively and that we dare to sing God's praises. There is power in praise. It lifts us up. Praise is vital (literally, life-giving) not just despite, but especially within, our feelings of loss and despair. It is good for us to echo the psalmist's prayer: *I will praise Him still, my Saviour and my God.*

We should note that the words of desolation Jesus prayed upon the cross – *My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?* – were taken from a psalm which speaks of the Lord being *enthroned upon the praises of [His people] Israel.*

To return to where we started: *Do not be afraid.*

Those words which are central to today's gospel passage are words that keep recurring in the Sacred Scriptures. They are at the heart of the resurrection Gospel accounts. *Do not be afraid. Do not yield to fear.* What we have there is an invitation to trust and to do so in hope. We all need to be encouraged in this sense; to have *fresh heart put into us.*

When we find our lives shrouded in darkness, under threat, victims of injustice, facing maltreatment and persecution, we are called to remember that the Risen Lord is with us. A verse from the prophecy of Isaiah, which could just as easily have been lines spoken by the Risen Christ, comes to mind: *Do not be dismayed. I am your God. Fear not, for I am with you. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*

I remember being told as a child by our local family pharmacist that the promise *Do not be afraid* is found in the Bible 365 times. The pharmacist's words have remained with me for nearly half a century at this stage. I hear them anew this morning as a reminder from God Himself to live every day fearless, in the sure and certain knowledge that the Lord is always at hand.

Amen!