

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

August 30, 2020

Homily of Most Reverend Mario Yamanouchi Michiaki
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Jesus and Jeremiah

O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.

(From Jeremiah 20:7-9)

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me.

(From Matthew 16:21-27)

Today's liturgy focuses on the painful consequences of the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah and those who want to follow Jesus. Both Jeremiah and Jesus draw attention to the conflict they have to face. First, we'll take a look at the historical setting of the prophet Jeremiah's ministry. Then, it is followed by a meditation on the three readings from today's Mass and some concluding prayers.

Prophet Jeremiah: his historical context

The experience of Babylonian exile and captivity marked the life of the Jews (the people of Israel). It was a very painful period, which demanded them to rethink their faith in the God of the Covenant: they had to reflect very seriously on why all this had happened to the people chosen by God to bring salvation to all other peoples. It was a very big crisis of their faith in God.

Jeremiah starts his ministry in this historical frame when the power of Babylon begins to spread through the Middle East; especially after the victory of Nebuchadnezzar over the army of Pharaoh Neco in the battle of Carchemish, Babylon becomes the sovereign of the whole region.

By divine inspiration Jeremiah exhorted the Israelites to submit to the king of Babylon. As a consequence the prophet was insulted and locked up in a dark prison of Jerusalem as a traitor and spy of the Babylonians (Jeremiah 37:14-21).

In 587 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Jews, destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, took the notables captive, enslaved thousands of people, executed the king's sons in his presence and then plucked out his eyes and took him captive to Babylon. In that raid, the Babylonians destroyed the temple of Jerusalem. Jeremiah was liberated and his friend Gedaliah was appointed Governor; but when he was killed, the Israelites forced Jeremiah to go with them to Egypt, where later he died.

The prophet Jeremiah was a Hebrew prophet who lived between 650-585 BC in Babylon and Egypt and was born into a family of priests and prophesied in Judah. He was a contemporary of Ezekiel before Daniel started prophesying. Among all the figures in the Old Testament Jeremiah is regarded as the one who most resembled Jesus in his suffering from being misunderstood and persecuted. Only after his death did the people recognize the great holiness of this prophet. And when all his prophecies had been fulfilled to the letter, they realized that he had indeed spoken in the name of God. It is a pity that they recognized him when it was already too late.

First Reading: Jeremiah's Confessions (Jer. 20:7-9)

We have here a new cry from Jeremiah to the God he serves. All that God has commanded him to do he has done; what he has commanded him to say he has said, and what was the result? Stubbornness and hatred on the part of his hearers. Nevertheless, Jeremiah recognizes that his attachment to the Word and his mission is stronger. This does not remove the prophet's sense of being deceived, because he did not know what was waiting for him and the Lord had not warned him either.

But above all there is the God of grace and mercy, and that is why in the depths of his anguish he launches a confident cry of hope and faith (Jeremiah

Chapters 11 to 13). The feeling of the prophet is extremely painful and contrasts with what he tells in his vocational story (Jeremiah 1:5), where, with a certain optimistic accent, he speaks of his choice from his mother's womb; here instead he curses that day, such is the feeling of failure and uselessness of his ministry, of the lack of meaning in his life.

The second reading: Paul's letter to the Romans

In the second reading Paul speaks to the Romans not only as a brother in faith but with the authority of the Apostle. He exhorts them to present their bodies an eternal sacrifice to God. He insists that true worship to God is not reduced to external rites but comes from a righteous life. Above all, the body is a vehicle of the inner life, so it must be a song of praise and gratitude to God. This is what conversion is for Paul: a life totally transformed by the Spirit of God, a change of mentality, values, and lifestyle. Only those who live in this way can have the criteria of discernment to seek, find and do the will of God.

The gospel reading: Matthew's gospel 16:21-27

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus shows his disciples that the path to the resurrection is closely linked to the painful experience of the cross. The main nucleus is his first announcement of the Passion. But the disciples, represented in the person of Peter, did not understand this reality. They were convinced of the glorious messianism of Jesus as the Jews of that time expected. But Jesus emphatically rejects this idea, because the will of the Father does not coincide with the expectation of Peter and the disciples. That is why Peter appears as an instrument of Satan before Jesus to hinder his mission.

A question for us

How do we live the prophetic dimension we received at baptism? How do you live as a prophet?

1. In the first reading, Jeremiah complains before God to lay down his heavy burden; he denounces what he feels in his heart that God is asking him to denounce, and this makes his contemporaries tired of him and want to say,

“Enough!” Jeremiah is also tired of this situation; he longs for a normal life with privacy, leaving behind all the complications of his prophetic ministry.

Question: Is this a situation unique to Jeremiah, or necessary to every single prophet? Why?

2. The gospel underlines the courage Jesus had to face the road without fearing bad omens. Peter was aware of the danger involved in the way Jesus continued to preach and act, and he also knew that the disciples themselves would be in danger if they continued to follow such a Master. Now, in what situations and challenges should we take Jesus' decision seriously?

Prayer

- May the Holy Spirit guide the Church in her mission to announce the Good News to all peoples and to support communities and individuals who are persecuted for their defense of the rights of the poor and the excluded. Let us pray to the Lord.

- May the religions of the world reflect on the meaning of the existence of other religions, prepare themselves for mutual acceptance and collaboration to build and safeguard the peace of the world. Let us pray to the Lord.

God our Father, fill our hearts with the strength of your love so that, trusting fully in you, we may be courageous witnesses to the Good News of the Kingdom in the world, especially in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, as disciples of your Son not only in word but in deed. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).