

Sunday June 21, 2020

(Readings: Jeremiah 20:10-13; Romans 5:12-15; Matthew 10:26-33)

Today's first reading from the Prophet Jeremiah and the third reading from Matthew's Gospel exhort us to continue to have faith in God's providential care even amidst galling trials and grievous sufferings, and even in today's context of Covid-19. At the time of Jeremiah, the context was the outright rejection and rancorous persecution Jeremiah suffered at the hands of his own obdurate people and the venal ruling class for speaking on behalf of Yahweh. And, at the time of Matthew in the first century AD, the context was the fierce persecution of the followers of Jesus by the successive ruthless Roman emperors and by the kosher and legit Jews who came to see the movement of Jesus as a threat to their own belief systems.

After the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians were bigotedly persecuted and brutally murdered by the bestial Roman emperors for abandoning the worship of Roman gods and believing in the lordship of Jesus. Out of fear for their own life, the early Christians started giving up their faith in Jesus. It is to persuade them to keep their faith in Jesus that Matthew addresses the words we find in today's Gospel: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

Matthew's exhortations to his community not to fear (vv. 26, 28, 31) were an entreaty to be loyal to Jesus and to trust in God's providential care. This is identical to a similar exhortation in 6:25-34. There are reasons as to why they should not fear. First, the persecutor can kill only the material body, not the soul (see Daniel 12:2; Malachi 4:1-3). Secondly, God the Father takes good care of us, because we are of more value than the invaluable little sparrows. This exhortation to freedom from fear and the assurance of the heavenly Father's protection were necessary in the context of the abject suffering in the early church (see 1 Peter 3:14; Revelation 2:10).

It is also this freedom from fear and the assurance of constant protection that we have always experienced from our earthly Dad while we were growing up. As long as our Dad was with us, we had nothing and no one to fear. He was our strength; he was our protection; he was our shield, and he was our refuge. As a person who grew up in India in the 1960s and 70s, I can vouch for the fact that a Dad is a person who is always willing to live his life as a pauper in order to ensure that his children lacked nothing. He would be skimpy with himself but would splurge on our needs. Indigent though his life was, our Dad was always indulgent with us and clothed us with fine linen, rich fabric, embroidered cloth, and fed us with choice flour and honey (Ezekiel 16:13). (This was mine. Add your own eulogies).

As we celebrate the **Fathers' Day** this Sunday, we immensely thank our Dads and sincerely express our profound gratitude and indebtedness to them for their unconditional love, sound advice, ruthless, gritty, and steely determination, constant guidance and supportive accompaniment in our lives. We can never thank them enough as we owe them an everlasting debt of gratitude. Nevertheless, thank you Dad. You made me what I am. God bless you.

I would like to return to prophet Jeremiah of today's first reading. Among all the prophets, arguably, it was Jeremiah who suffered most at the hands of his enemies. Of an affectionate and gentle disposition though, his vocation was "to tear up and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow" (1:10). He was tortured by a duty he could not refuse (20:9). As a spokesperson for Yahweh, Jeremiah had let loose a strident criticism and unleashed a blistering attack on the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, on the personal aggrandizement of the elite, on the cupidity of the rich, and on the rampant corruption by the ruling class. Consequently, Jeremiah was brutally persecuted by his enemies and mercilessly abandoned by his friends who had now turned belligerent. And, he cries out in agony to Yahweh as we read in today's first reading where he says that his enemies are denouncing him and wanting to take revenge on him. Later, in the same chapter, Jeremiah curses the day on which he was born, the day his mother bore him, and curses also the man who brought the good news of his birth to his father (Verses 14-15). However, Jeremiah doesn't allow his bitterness and tears to congeal into hatred and despondency.

A bit cantankerous in the beginning, he gradually stops griping and begins to have hope in Yahweh's goodness. After he presents before God all his sufferings, there is now a shift in verses 11-13. In verse 11, Jeremiah expresses his faith that Yahweh will protect him against all his persecutors. This expression of faith by Jeremiah begins with the conjunction "But," which **Professor Walter Brueggemann** famously termed a "**disruptive conjunction.**" A "disruptive conjunction" is a conjunction that abruptly brings to an end a thought or argument and turns the person's thinking toward another direction. The point is that Jeremiah's litany of complaints meanders to an expression of his faith in Yahweh's providential care.

This conjunction ('but') is an act of repentance from living in the bubble of self-enclosure and possessive individualism. That is, Jeremiah comes to the awareness that he needs to let go his obsession with himself and with his sufferings and let Yahweh take charge because, ultimately, it is Yahweh who will be the victor and not his enemies. The conjunction "but" puts an end to his persecution complex. Jeremiah's "But, the LORD is with me" in verse 11 implies that Jeremiah now believes that Yahweh has an agenda beyond his own personal agenda. Jeremiah's recognition of God's agenda or God's plan for his life finally leads him to turn his voice of complaints into yielding to Yahweh's will in his life. Thus, despite all his sufferings, Jeremiah yields, gives in, and surrenders to God's providential care. This is faith. This is salvation. This is living in the kingdom. But, this surrender in faith is frightening as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). Since faith as a **surrender** is frightening, most people today, in every religion, choose to settle down with belief systems, which do not require any surrender.

The despairing cry of Jeremiah and that of the early Christians is also the cry of anyone today who chooses to believe in God's kingdom and in the lordship of Jesus rather than in human kingdoms and in the lordship and queendom of present day kings and queens. Just like Jeremiah and the early Christians, we too will piteously cry out to God seeking His intervention, healings and blessings. But, we will be able to experience ineffable joy and everlasting peace within us (which is the meaning of "being saved") only when we are ready for that "disruptive conjunction" expressing our faith in God's providential care and making a total surrender to God's agenda, as Jeremiah and Matthew soundly advise us in today's readings. Amen.

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