

## Third Thursday of Lent Readings

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 7:23-28

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: This is what I commanded my people: Listen to my voice; then I will be your God and you shall be my people. Walk in all the ways that I command you, so that you may prosper. But they obeyed not, nor did they pay heed. They walked in the hardness of their evil hearts and turned their backs, not their faces, to me. From the day that your fathers left the land of Egypt even to this day, I have sent you untiringly all my servants the prophets. Yet they have not obeyed me nor paid heed; they have stiffened their necks and done worse than their fathers. When you speak all these words to them, they will not listen to you either; when you call to them, they will not answer you. Say to them: This is the nation that does not listen to the voice of the LORD, its God, or take correction. Faithfulness has disappeared; the word itself is banished from their speech.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

***If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.***

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD; let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us joyfully sing PSALM s to him.

***If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.***

Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the LORD who made us. For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.

***If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.***

Oh, that today you would hear his voice: "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the desert, Where your fathers tempted me; they tested me though they had seen my works."

***If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.***

GOSPEL: Luke 11:14-23

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute, and when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke and the crowds were amazed. Some of them said, "By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons." Others, to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven. But he knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. And if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that it is by Beelzebul that I drive out demons. If I, then, drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man fully armed guards his palace, his possessions are safe. But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

The Gospel of the Lord.

### Third Thursday of Lent Reflection

Jeremiah the prophet had a tendency to see the cup half empty. A prophet, in the bible, was one who preached God's word to God's people. Sometimes we can mistake a prophet to be a fortune teller, one who can see into the future and predict what will happen. God, in speaking to Moses from the Burning Bush in the desert, called himself, "I am Who am." Personally that dialogue between God and Moses has always reminded me of Popeye the Sailor who said, "I am what I am and that's all that I am; I'm Popeye the Sailor Man." That aside, Jeremiah is not trying to get people to change in the future, but now as God is the eternal now.

However, he sees no change in God's people at all. He states God's Covenant, "I will be your God and you will be my people if you hear my voice and walk in my ways." Jeremiah speaks as if this isn't already the case, for the covenant began centuries before in the story of Exodus. The relationship of God to God's people, the Jews, exists to this day. The situation that the prophet lays out sounds to me like a threat, "Do this or else!" This reminds me of the tactic some grammar school teachers used when I was a kid. Often there were a couple jokers in the class who disrupted the classroom. To get them in line and to put pressure on them from their peers, they would punish the entire class. I have always thought those tactics to be an injustice to those who wanted to learn. I would lose respect for the teacher for pulling such a stunt. Was the entire Hebrew People, as a group living outside the Covenant? Were God's People as a whole living in revolt to God? I have always wondered about that. Often with the prophets, their main complaint was against the people of power, the king, the high priest or the elders. Here, Jeremiah addresses his complaint against the whole nation! His complaint will become even more strident and desperate later on in his book. He, himself will be threatened with death.

All of us have members of our families or people we know who rarely go to Church. Since, the threat of the coronavirus, COVID19, we are all prevented from going. Some of us will allow them some latitude, but others among us fear for their eternal lives and try as they might persuade them to go. Some times the tactics used can be nagging, coercing and threatening the fires of hell. Is this how the Covenant between God and God's People works? What of God's love, mercy, forgiveness and compassion?

Faith is a gift from God. It comes neither from Jeremiah nor from well intentioned people. Faith comes from God in God's own time, not ours. We cannot force God's hand in this either. Storming heaven or demanding God to act runs contrary to the prayer Jesus taught us. We pray, "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done." Do we mean it when we pray it?

My mother's family had two groups of people, with some exceptions. The first group was so holy and pious, they would tell everyone how faithful they were; how they went to church every day, did novenas each afternoon and prayed the rosary until they fell asleep. This group loved priests and, since I was the family priest, they could spend hours telling me all this. They also did something else. They would complain about the other group in the family.

The second group was those who had a chip on their shoulders against the Church. Since I was their family priest too, they love to tell me all the things wrong with the Church and the first

group who looked down their noses on them. Now, as a priest, I already knew what was wrong with the Church. This group had a second behavior as well. When they saw I arrived at a family gathering, they would up and leave for the basement thus leaving me to hear from the first group how holy and pious they were. I was always happy when priestly ministry prevented me from attending family gatherings.

Eventually I would make it into the basement, visit with the second group, have a beer (this always surprised them) and listen to their complaints. Often I agreed with them (which always surprised them more). Since I treated them as fellow human beings, who live life too, we would get along. I discovered that many felt alienated because of divorce, living with a lover or had been turned away by some parish priest. Healing can take place if someone can show compassion instead of judgment.

If Jeremiah had troubles, Jesus had more. He has performed a miracle, a sign of his divinity and people fall short of calling him Satan comparing his work to a work of Satan. What have people done with those who conjured Satan? They burned them at the stake as a witch! People's response to Jesus may stun us a bit, but it is Jesus response to them that is telling.

Jesus responds with reason, almost gently to their insane accusations. He points out that his accusers perform the same works of healing. He doesn't even accuse them back. He accepts that they too work through God's power. The fact that Jesus is God brings God's mercy as opposed to God's wrath.

As Jesus mentions Satan's kingdom falling, we know the rest of Jesus' story. Through Jesus' cross that very thing happened! Satan has fallen; salvation has won! Jesus has redeemed us through his death on the cross. I have always thought that Jesus was being ironic, knowing what his mission was to bring. When Jesus talks about the Strong Man, who is he? Who is the One Stronger? As a kid, often the priests would intimate that each of us is the Strong Man trying to resist the stronger, who is Satan. In other words we face our temptations and demons; be strong. This is far from the truth. The Strong Man is Satan, over powered by the One Stronger, Jesus! How can God be over powered by any of God's creation? It is only by relying on God that we can resist temptation. We don't have to face our demons alone.

We are, by nature, people who are social. We can depend and rely upon others. This, of course, is a little difficult these days as we keep six feet apart, social gathering are restricted and masses postponed as we practice social distancing. There are other methods of communication. We have phones we carry with us, some have email or texting, there's social media and Skype and who has written a letter recently? With God, public worship is postponed, there is prayer. As the pope is doing so do I. I celebrate mass privately for the parish intentions and for our continued health and healing (sanity too). Since I'm not going to preach to myself, even though the message of my homilies is also for me, I'm writing a reflection for Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, the days that I would celebrate mass, and putting each reflection up on the parish website. I've never learned to type, so writing these things takes much longer than homily preparation. It takes between five and ten minutes to deliver the talk. It's about a quarter of one in the afternoon I started typing about ten twenty this morning.

Sometimes witnessing to faith means to listen and care. I have felt, for many years, it is better to invite and allow God to work as God chooses and through the events and people that come

our way by God's grace. Often the people and events we seem difficult and painful. Isolation can be lonely, but with a change of perspective it can also be solitude. In solitude we can encounter God. Separation from others can be lonely, but in solitude we can remember them to God. I place those I meet, along with myself, into God's loving embrace. God's arms will not transmit any virus.