

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 20:7-9

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah:

You duped me, O LORD, and I let myself be duped; you were too strong for me, and you triumphed. All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I must cry out, violence and outrage is my message; the word of the LORD has brought me derision and reproach all the day. I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

O God, you are my God whom I seek; for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts like the earth, parched, lifeless and without water.

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

Thus have I gazed toward you in the sanctuary to see your power and your glory, For your kindness is a greater good than life; my lips shall glorify you.

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

Thus will I bless you while I live; lifting up my hands, I will call upon your name. As with the riches of a banquet shall my soul be satisfied, and with exultant lips my mouth shall praise you.

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

You are my help, and in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy. My soul clings fast to you; your right hand upholds me.

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.

SECOND READING: Romans 12:1-2

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans:

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Matthew 16:21-27

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised. Then Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life? For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay all according to his conduct."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 22nd Sunday of the Year

Life can be tough. People can be tougher. We all need some toughness to face life. Sometimes our toughness can be mean. We don't always treat others well. Jeremiah the prophet often began his passages with the words, "Thus says the Lord." Today he addresses God, "You have duped me!" He seems to throw his angry, hurt and disparaging words into God's face. He seems to blame God for his situation. He may be partly right in his assessment. There are no warranties in

life. Just because God called Jeremiah and gave him a mission doesn't give him a guarantee of success. His exasperation and pain come from the fact that he found himself between a rock and a hard place. He had a message and mission that few, but him, accepted. Those who heard Jeremiah's message not only rejected it, they rejected and persecuted Jeremiah too. As it turned out, some even attempted to assassinate Jeremiah. Fortunately they ultimately failed to do so.

I imagine the ache in the prophet's soul. It felt as if his spirit was being choked. To where could Jeremiah turn? Could he turn to family and friends? Who was his confidant? He turned to God. He expressed all his anger, frustration and desire for revenge and vindication to God who chose him as a prophet. Some of us would fear the wrath of God if we did that in our pain. Jeremiah knew that God was the only one who would listen and heal him. The poet and theologian John Shea once wrote that healing is not the same as a cure. Jeremiah still had a mission even if people failed to accept God's message. Jeremiah's precarious situation did not go away. People didn't flock to hear God's Word which remained difficult. In turning to God in his pain, Jeremiah discovered God's healing grace to continue. God's prophet continued to prophesy. God guided Jeremiah's steps. He was able to put one foot in front of another and to step out into what seemed like thin air. For as the story continued, things would get worse.

What was this offensive message? It was repent, reform, serve God and the community. Jeremiah also spoke the truth of doom and destruction from invasion, death and Diaspora. People never want to hear things like that. Change is difficult. People resist admitting being wrong. Ending bad habits is never an easy task. Who would begrudge Jeremiah if he had just walked away and got on with living his life?

Yet, listen closely how the passage ends. There is something in him that won't let him. He tells us of a fire that burns in him. He can't keep it in. This is chapter twenty of his book. There are fifty two in the book. He has thirty two more to go. He can be like a moth to a flame. Is Jeremiah on a course of self destruction or on a path to salvation?

As I read this passage I asked, "Have I ever felt like this?" If I am honest, yes. I've been assigned to a number of parishes since ordination. I always like to build on the gifts and mission of the parish. It is easier to build on a good foundation

rather than rip things apart and re-invent the wheel. Unfortunately, not every priest works that way. I have seen years of good, hard work, the dedication of good people being undone and turned away after my transfer. I have addressed God with words like Jeremiah used too. Here I am, though, still trying to build a community and strive to God's Kingdom. I have the same fire too.

How did healing come to Jeremiah. His problems never went away. People continued to resist or ignore God's message. He was even thrown into a dry cistern and left to die. Jeremiah had some supporters. They came and rescued him before long. Jeremiah's life's work was not all in vain. His brush with death was also an experience of being alive. The grace of God that came through Jeremiah's preaching moved some. Jeremiah witnessed that in his rescue. He caught a glimpse of God's salvation. The flame burning within him and his experience of mission converged with those same qualities in his followers. Something inside him compelled his preaching. The Holy Spirit guided his words in preaching and prayer. How can anyone know this actually happened? We have Jeremiah's book in the bible. Faithful people have been reading Jeremiah's story for millennia and have discovered profound meaning in his words.

*As I type, I remember words to a song, the second verse of, "You raise me up."
There is no life no life without its hunger; Each restless heart beats so imperfectly;
But when you come and I am filled with wonder Sometimes, I think I glimpse
eternity*

*You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains; You raise me up, to walk on stormy
seas;
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders; You raise me up to more than I can be*

Jeremiah turned to God with his gripes. Jeremiah revealed to God what felt like emptiness and failure. God did not turn Jeremiah away, condemn him or punish him. God renewed Jeremiah's spirit. In turning to God, Jeremiah found exactly what he needed to face the mission ahead. God raised him up.

These days I watch television by myself. I have a sister and priest friend with whom I have watched in the past. I may laugh, cry or be surprised as the show unfolds. I enjoy letting the story unfold. These other two are more impatient and always would ask what's going to happen next or will the main character survive.

Even with re-runs they've seen before. The main character rarely dies and the storyline always works out. I've read Jeremiah's book. Jeremiah may have written his book. The book was based upon Jeremiah's own experience and life journey. Only with him did the story truly unfold. I find my own life unfolds in the same way. Can you?

Here and now we face an uncertain future. The pandemic rages as thousands of people get infected, world wide, with COVID 19 every day. There is no end in sight yet with no treatment and no vaccine. The words protest, prejudice and privilege haunt us. Political rhetoric and political division continue to mount. How do we face God? Perhaps God has duped us? To whom do we turn? If we follow the course of Jeremiah, we may find a way. God stood by him in his troubles, trials and tribulations. God does not take them away but gives faithful people the strength. This is the healing without a cure.

All three of these readings speak of painful things. We witnessed Jeremiah's distress. Paul has written that we must offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. We must become transformed to discern God's will to become pleasing, good and perfect. That doesn't sound too appealing. I always look at parenting. I am the oldest of my siblings. In effect I was the "guinea pig," for the other three. I was not allowed to learn to ride a bicycle until I was twelve. My brother who is eight years my junior learned before he was six. They bought the bike new for him. I had to buy my own. Two things, my parents both had better paying jobs eight years later and they gained experience in raising children. Transformation happened; they got better with parenting skills. I didn't maim or kill myself as I learned to ride a bike, in the days before helmets. As we live our lives of faith, we aren't always aware of how God has changed us. Each of us seeks God; God first sought us.

I often remark, thank God I'm not God. I do not have eternal and unconditional patience, mercy or compassion. Just drive with me for a while. You will hear what Jesus said to Peter coming out of my mouth in a less eloquent and a more crass manner. "Get thee behind me Satan for you are slowing me down for you drive as an old man and not like me (It matters not, of course, that over the years I have gotten old). These days I try to say, "God bless you," instead. Even though I really want to say the other thing I try not to say it. The mere temptation is not a sin if I really give a blessing.

Why did Peter say what he did? Jesus mentioned the mission of his cross four times in the gospel of Matthew. This is the second. Jesus, like Jeremiah faced opposition to his message. We expect resistance from the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and other authorities but not from the disciples. From their point of view, Jesus spoke lunacy. Who in their right mind would subject themselves to such a fate? No one can, "rise from the dead!" Peter may have professed his faith in Jesus calling him Messiah and God's son. They didn't understand why the Messiah would suffer, die and rise. Salvation was really from sin and death not Roman rule.

I think we look at this gospel from the perspective of the apostles, specifically Peter. What of Jesus' perspective? Can we see this episode through his eyes? What Jesus was to choose, the Way of the Cross was not pleasant. Peter was partly right. Who in their right mind would choose this? Jesus chose this. Granted Jesus is fully God and fully human. Jesus was in his right mind. As one like us Jesus experienced fear of pain and suffering. He didn't want to die. "Father let this cup pass from me! Not my will but thine be done," he prayed in the garden.

Jesus could be tempted. Jesus was tempted in the desert for food, wealth and power; to abuse being God for self interest. Perhaps in Peter's vehement rebuke did Jesus resolve waver. In Peter's mind saving the life of Jesus was critical. Nikos Kazantzakis wrote a book, "The Last Temptation of Christ." Martin Scorsese directed the movie. The book was better. I've read the book four times. I add that it is on Rome's index of forbidden books. Jesus' last temptation came to him while dying on the cross. It was to live the life of a normal man; to have a wife, children and a home. Rome did not like the wife part. It was Mary Magdalene. The character who ended Jesus' reverie was Judas. In terms of the actual Gospel Peter may have provoked such thoughts in Jesus with his "remonstration."

Jesus powerful and negative response to Peter may show the depths of Jesus' humanity. This really shook him up. Perhaps Jesus had to get over his shock and horror of what he knew would come. Think of what it's like to be given a diagnosis of a fatal disease. Jesus, like us, would go through Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' Five Stages of Grief. What stage does Jesus' outburst sound like? This is one of the rare passages where we catch a glimpse of Jesus' humanity. We discover that he went through all we go through.

What is Jesus' cross? It's the means and location of his execution. It is a symbol of suffering and pain. It is also the means of our salvation. Upon it Jesus chose to sacrifice his life to God in our place. Jesus, as he died on the cross, had each of us in mind, every member of the human race. He died for you and me. Jesus' life was the ransom for our lives. Through the cross Jesus forgave our sins. The cross was Jesus' mission. It was in God's mind from before creation.

When Jesus tells us to take up our own cross, what does he mean? We all face troubles, pain and disappointment. St. Paul tells us that we make up for what is lacking in the cross of Jesus when we add our suffering to Jesus' cross. As a kid, the adults in my life would always tell me to, "Offer it up," whenever I'd complain or gripe. This is part of what Jesus meant. To embrace our cross is more. Who, like Jesus, has a mission? Surely Jeremiah and Paul had one. I, as a priest, can claim one. So could all of us. By nature of our baptism we all have one. We are all Jesus' disciples and follow him. Because we believe and follow Jesus, we give witness of our faith to others. We live our lives day after day and can lose our sense of mission into a sense of drudgery. One day can seem like all the others. Parents have a mission. Spouses have a mission. Children have a mission. People who have any authority or responsibility have a mission. Sometimes we know it clearly; other times less so. Our mission may be completely different than we assume. Life can always pitch a slider.

A parent's mission is to love, teach, guide and raise their children to become adults and move away. A child's mission is to grow to an adult, thus ending their childhood. Every five years I leave one community for another. We can all both have and suffer passion with our mission. Being excited for what we do is as important in our lives as facing trials. We do both by the grace of God. I like to point out that parents give their lives to their children. How long does it take to raise one, 20-30 years? By the time the last of my siblings finally moved away, my parents were retired. This gives real meaning to Jesus saying. Those who give up their life will find it. When we love, we share God, who is love.

The inner fire that drove Jeremiah was a source of pain and the very grace of God that led him. God transformed Paul from a bounty hunter to the Church's greatest preacher. His words still guide us. The cross Jesus embraced fully is not unlike our

life's purpose and mission. We embrace our cross too. For us to gain eternal life takes a lifetime of living. All of this is by the grace of God.

The pandemic continues; let us pray for those who risk for us. Prejudice is sin; let us pray for sinners (of whom I am the foremost). Wash your hands, often. Wear a mask in public places. Keep six feet distance from others. This is the cross, now, that we embrace in Jesus' name.

James D. Beath

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