

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Among the variety of ideas we could pick up from today's readings are, i) the reality of life tells us that we will inevitably face hurdles and opposition but trust in divine graciousness will boost our commitment and bring us through, ii) our witness to the values of Christ can keep us fixed on the ultimate goal.

Jeremiah 20:10-13 Among the Hebrew prophets Jeremiah stands out as having had an extraordinarily rough time. We get a hint of his feelings in this first reading. He lived during the closing years of the Judean kingdom (c. 627-586) when the Assyrian Empire was on the wane and Babylon was emerging as the dominant power in the region. Egypt was also eager to take over Palestine and Syria.

Jeremiah met severe opposition when he criticized four kings of the period, along with priests, prophets and the upper crust for their idolatry, ambition, greed and shameless treatment of the lower classes. The rich and powerful believed that God supported their political ambitions but Jeremiah opposed this and maintained that God only supported justice, faithfulness to the covenant, and care for the poor and vulnerable.

Jeremiah saw a national disaster coming with the advance of the Babylonian forces. He even advocated making an alliance with Babylon but he was shouted down by his opponents. He argued that Israel's misfortunes were down to the worship of foreign gods and goddesses and that this idolatry led to gross injustice and all the other abuses of God's law.

His one consolation was that the Lord was on his side.

The prophet admits he does not want this job of lashing out and making enemies through his prophecies. In the verses just before today's reading he says he was enticed by God; he uses strong language to say that he was lured or sucked into the job. His one consolation was that the Lord was on his side and his enemies would ultimately be the victims of God's punishment.

We have to admire the commitment of Jeremiah who had so many threats to overcome that he could have justifiably tossed in the towel at any point in his life. He had moments of whinging but the bottom line for him was that God was supporting him. Unconquerable trust in God gave him strength to carry on.

Psalms 69 This psalm has an uncanny affinity with the laments of Jeremiah. The poet complains of being exhausted with weeping and worn out by opposition from those who find his message unwelcome. The first Christians, who were mostly Jewish, applied this psalm to the sufferings of Christ. Like Jeremiah, the psalmist has the consolation of knowing that God is on his side and will vindicate him in the end.

Romans 5:12-15 In this passage Paul refers to Adam and Christ as archetypal figures, that is, characters who represent universal experiences. In this case Adam is a figure of sin in the form of opposition to God's wishes through selfish ambition. This stands for the human condition and death. Christ, on the other hand, is a figure of love and self-giving that brings the free gift of fulfilment and life.

This is a part of Paul's overall argument that it is by faith that Gentiles can belong to the community of Christ. The life and death of Christ has made it possible for humanity to be raised up.

Matthew 10:26-33 This passage makes it clear that Matthew was not writing a biography of Jesus but was putting together an operating guide for the community or church of his day. The majority scholarly view is that Matthew's gospel was written sometime between 80 and 90 AD.

These sayings of Jesus have been put together in view of the missionary endeavours of the Matthean church. It is clear that the message of Jesus went to a limited number of people during his lifetime, but more obvious that the same message would spread far more widely by Christian missionaries who went out in the closing years of the first century and thereafter.

Jesus is encouraging his people not to fear as they spread his message. It certainly would have made more sense to Matthew's community when decrees went out from Rome to persecute anyone who refused to worship the emperor. We can easily think that Rome persecuted Christians because they

opposed Christianity. The truth is that Rome allowed all kinds of religions, but took exception to anyone who refused to worship the emperor. By all means practise your own religion and its rites, but make sure you worship the emperor as well. The Christians, of course, refused this practice.

Jesus drew a distinction between those who can persecute the human body and those who could destroy the inner self, the very person of a human being. He used the image of the refuse tip outside the city of Jerusalem where there was the continual smoulder of burning rubbish. This place was called *gei Hinnom*, the valley of Hinnom. It was the place where refuse and cast-offs were dumped.

The vast majority of English translations of Matthew use the word 'hell' to translate Matthew's Greek word *gehennē*. Many biblical scholars prefer using Gehenna because it reminds readers that Jesus was speaking within a first-century Jewish context. He was certainly not drumming up the later horrific Christian concepts of hell that we find in medieval art and literature.

Our lifestyle advertises our position.

Reference to the death of a sparrow and the hairs of a person's head reminds us of God's unrestricted attention the smallest created things. From this we get the impression of care and connection with the Creator. In short, Jesus is saying that, all the more will 'our Father' take care of us. Fear doesn't belong in the equation.

The passage ends with a reminder that our relationship with Jesus is of primary importance. To reject Jesus is to reject God, and our way to God is through Jesus. Matthew uses the words of Jesus to emphasise that there is no middle ground – we are either for Jesus or against him. Our lifestyle advertises our position.



Commitment is what transforms a promise into reality.

Abraham Lincoln



'Do you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband, for better or for worse?'

'Just as he is, Father, just as he is. If he gets any better the good Lord will take him, and if he gets any worse, I'll attend to him myself.'

Laurie Woods