

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Today's readings consider what is involved in following the divine call to be faithful to God. Jeremiah reflects on the price he has paid in dedicating his life to the prophetic vocation with its hardships and rejection. The psalmist thirsts for God with a dedication and optimism that rise above the ordinary. Paul describes the Christian dedication to God as a self-offering that involves a *metanoia*, a change of life and values, and Jesus points out that self-giving is the only way into authentic discipleship.

Jeremiah 20:7-9 The prophet is addressing God and describes his commitment to the divine with pretty raw language. We can hear him virtually accusing God of having roped him into something when he was totally unaware of the price to be paid.

The Hebrew verb here is *patah*, which means entice, seduce, with a note of deception thrown in. Jeremiah is accusing God of having overpowered him and drawn him into a life that has made him an object of ridicule.

Jeremiah could not live with himself if he remained silent.

As is the case with so many of the prophets his message has been totally unwelcome because his preaching is filled with condemnation and warnings of approaching catastrophe. But the irony is, the divine word has become so embedded in him that he cannot keep silent. He is on fire with the need to proclaim the word of the Lord, so much so, that he could not live with himself if he remained silent.

He might remind us of Shakespeare's Hamlet. If he continues to point out the evils of his day he is vilified and remains a laughingstock; if he shuts up and goes away quietly he would feel he had betrayed himself and his calling. The life of an authentic prophet is exceptionally demanding.

Psalms 63 This psalm sings of a mystical satisfaction in the relationship between the poet and his Lord. We can see straightaway that his poetry is deeply personal and his longing for God is filled with appreciation, trust and joy. His Lord is as necessary to him as water to a desert plant.

Most English translations have an equivalent to 'Your love is better than life' in v.3. The Hebrew *khesed*, so often translated as love, contains a mixture of ideas encompassing a long lasting faithful love that is gracious and compassionate – all that in one Hebrew word.

The poet declares that without God there is thirst and dryness – insufficient for adequate life. With God there is satisfaction and abundance – enough for a full and rewarding life.

Romans 12:1-2 Paul's opening statement here reminds us of the compassion of God, a notion that is repeated so often in the Hebrew Scriptures because it is central to the ancient Hebrew image of God.

We cannot help but be struck by Paul's sacrificial language in this extract. Everyone in the Roman church would have converted to Christ from either Judaism or one of the other religions of the day and so would be familiar with the idea of sacrifice, animal or vegetable or other. Paul makes the point that following Christ involves self-giving and that a life dedicated to Christ and living out the values he put forward is a form of offering, a generous sacrifice.

This commitment is, in fact, a new way of living. It is an authentic change of mind and lifestyle (*metanoia*) that enables us to discern what is good – what is in harmony with the values of Jesus. This is seeing life differently with a new set of values and priorities.

Living in this Christian fashion our lives become a sacrifice offered to God that is not only acceptable but complete. Many translations render this as 'perfect,' but Paul's idea is that our self-sacrifice would be complete as the best we can offer. By transforming our lives to the values of Christ we are offering God the best we can.

Matthew 16:21-27 Again we are reminded of the concrete cost of discipleship by the words of Jesus. In his case, following the will of his Father was a life and death issue in which there was no room for compromise. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a German Lutheran Pastor who publicly opposed the Hitler regime. He was arrested by the Gestapo and hanged in 1945 just weeks before the German surrender.

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* he insisted that Christian discipleship was not theoretical. He demonstrated with his life that his theology and his living practice were inseparable.

In this extract Jesus states that his arrest and murder are part of his destiny. This is a problem for Peter because just prior to this (Mt 16:16) he had declared his belief in Jesus as Messiah. But when he takes Jesus aside and insists that this suffering must not happen he shows that he doesn't understand what being Messiah means. In response, Jesus calls Peter Satan.

Read this literally and you are in deep bother. Jesus' language here is an example of metonymy or a compressed way of saying that Peter's protest represents a Satan-like idea of going against the destiny that Jesus has accepted. Jesus calls Peter a 'stumbling block' that would trip him up and prevent him from carrying out God's purposes.

A life lived for self, will inevitably be shallow

He then spells out a pattern for discipleship that involves his way of self-giving as part of living according to God's way and values. Jesus uses an enigmatic expression saying that if a person wants to save his/her life they will lose it. The Greek of Matthew's Gospel has the word *psyche* for 'life' and this actually means self/person/whole being. So, what Jesus means is that if we make self-preservation or personal advantage our top priority we will lose out. A life lived for self, will inevitably be shallow and is definitely not the Jesus way. The self-obsessed will never achieve authentic maturity. With such a narrow focus they will lack empathy and emotional development along with the inability to judge wisely and value personal accountability.

On the other hand, those who relinquish self-interest and recognise that following Christ involves self-sacrifice and the readiness to reach out to other human beings with compassion, will grow in wisdom and maturity. They will achieve their purpose in life and will bask in fulfilling relationships. A life focussed on love, service and fidelity to Christ will achieve its potential.

Jesus is redefining what winning and losing are ultimately all about. Clinging to self-interest may bring short term gains but it doesn't lead to a deeply fulfilling life. As Matthew 25:40 reveals, Jesus judges according to concrete actions of self-giving toward others: feeding, welcoming, clothing, visiting and caring. 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'



The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

Mahatma Gandhi



A parishioner says to the priest after Mass, 'Father, your homily reminded me of the peace and mercy of God.'

Delighted, the priest asks why.

'It passed all understanding and seemed to last forever.'

Laurie Woods