

Homily-DoNotBeAfraid
Jeremiah 20, 10-13
Matthew 10:26-33

As is often true the readings that we hear today speak to our daily lives. In fact today's Gospel speaks to our daily lives in a very practical way. The readings speak about being faithful in times of trial.

All of us go through times of trial and difficulty. At times our finances, relationships, health cause difficulty in our lives. The readings today speak to us about being faithful in these times of difficulty and knowing that in the midst of these trials that God is with us. Today's readings help to sustain our hope.

Jeremiah

The first reading is from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. This is one of the books in the Old Testament to which I am most drawn because it is one of the most human books in the Bible. The Book of Jeremiah not only presents the prophecies of Jeremiah but also the inner turmoil of the prophet. Jeremiah was called at a very young age and was unsure that he should be a prophet. At the time of his calling God spoke a message that would stay with Jeremiah for his entire life. At the beginning of his ministry God said, **"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you says the Lord (Jeremiah 1:8)." and "They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord to deliver you (Jeremiah 1:19)."** Throughout his entire life Jeremiah prophesied against idolatry, mistreatment of the poor and alliances with foreign governments. The idolatry included making offerings to other gods including the offering of children as burnt offerings to the god Baal. As a result of this idolatry Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. The faithfulness of Jeremiah led to resistance from his friends as well as religious and political leaders and even put his life in jeopardy. Instead of turning away from his message he turned to God alone. Confident that God would intervene Jeremiah did not change his message

In the reading of today, Jeremiah castigates the leaders for not obeying God's word. The head of the Temple police, Passhur, puts Jeremiah in stocks and scourges him. Later in his life he is thrown in a cistern to die and released only through the intercession of the Ethiopian court official Ebed melech. According to later Jewish tradition Jeremiah is martyred in Egypt. Throughout his life Jeremiah stayed faithful to God as he was confident that God would deliver him.

The reading we hear proclaimed is from an interior crisis that Jeremiah experiences. Jeremiah begins to express his anguish by stating, “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed (Jeremiah 20:7).” The meaning of entice is both to seduce and to deceive. Yahweh tricked his messenger. There is a sense that God forced Jeremiah to prophesy. In the midst of this interior crisis Jeremiah states, **“But the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph (Jeremiah 20:11).”** Jeremiah knows God is with him as he proclaims this difficult message. In the midst of strong contradictions he remains loyal to Yahweh.

Matthew

The Gospel comes from the Missionary Discourse in Matthew’s Gospel. Last week we heard the beginning of this section of the Gospel. Last week’s Gospel began, “‘When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’ Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest (Matthew 9:36-38).’” The harvest about which Jesus speaks is the coming of the kingdom of God and the final judgment. In response to the final coming of the kingdom, Jesus chooses twelve disciples whom he empowers to heal and cast out evil in order to proclaim the kingdom and prepare others for the coming of the kingdom. Last week I proclaimed that we are modern day apostles sent out by God to proclaim the Good News as did the original apostles.

The Missionary Discourse continues by speaking about the persecutions which await the apostles as they proclaim the Good News of Jesus. Just as Jesus will be handed over to the Roman and Jewish authorities so will the apostles be handed over to Jewish and Gentile authorities. Just as Jesus will be scourged so will they be flogged. The reading says that the Holy Spirit will use them as a mouthpiece and if they remain faithful they will be saved.

Today’s selection comes from near the end of Jesus’ instruction to his disciples as he sends them forth to carry on his mission of preaching and healing. Jesus begins by saying “Do not be afraid.” In spite of the opposition they are to expect, they are not to fear their enemies. Jesus exhorts the apostles to speak the message that they have heard from the housetops. They are to boldly and openly proclaim Jesus’ message. Jesus’ message is public property and it is to be proclaimed to all. In a small Palestinian village if one wanted his/her message to carry far they could stand on a roof and scream. Jesus says we need to proclaim His message in the same way.

In order to prepare His disciples for the attacks they will receive which could even end in death, Jesus tells them that they are to not fear those who can kill the body but not kill the soul. The disciples are to fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna. The scripture writer Daniel Harrington, S.J. writes that this verse refers to God who can destroy both body and soul at the last judgment.

Jesus then says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart for your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31)." Sparrows were very common in the Holy Land in Jesus' time. Some people trapped and sold them. They were very cheap, but so small they yielded very little meat. Nevertheless poor people bought sparrows to eat and also to offer as sacrifices at the temple. The point of Jesus' saying about sparrows is that these birds were among the most insignificant creatures that people in Jesus' time and place could imagine.

After warning the apostles about the dangers facing them, Jesus reminds them that his loving Father, who exercises care for insignificant creatures like sparrows so that not one of them drops to the ground without God's knowledge, will surely care for them and us. We are worth more than sparrows and so we can trust God to love us and care for us. In this way the tiny sparrow becomes a symbol of hope. When we become confused, frustrated and fearful, we may find clarity and hope in this image: if God cares for sparrows, how much more does God care for us and want what is good for us.

Jesus says that even the hairs of our head are counted. Jesus says that God knows and cares about even the smallest details of our lives down to the numbers of the hairs on our head. This verse shows the care that God has for each of us.

"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven (Matthew 10:32-33)." The disciples are to not be afraid to acknowledge him before others and this will lead to Jesus acknowledging us before our heavenly Father.

The Gospel calls us to not be a people who are driven by fear. We are to not fear when we present our faith to others. Neither are we to fear in our daily lives. We are to know that God is with us and that God is even a part of our daily lives.

The second reading reminds us that we are to have hope as a result both of the love of God in our personal lives but also as a result of the salvation that was won through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The second reading speaks about Adam who is the symbol of fallen humankind, enslaved under the dominion of sin and death and about Christ who is the symbol of redeemed humankind and the image of the one through whom we have been freed from sin and death and freed for life in the Spirit. While we often see the effects of sin and death in the world, the challenge of the Christian life is to let the risen Christ shape our very self and let our life reflect His life.

The readings of today remind us that even though we have valid fears in our lives we are to remember that God walks with us and is there to deliver us. We are not to fear as God both knows and values us. We are to be a hopeful people not only because God knows us but also because Christ has come to free us from the power of sin and death so that we might live in confidence and joy.