

Rev. Derek Fairman

22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time A

The first reading from the prophet Jeremiah finds us with the prophet in turmoil. He does not like dealing with the opposition that his message faces. The leaders in Jerusalem did not want to believe that anything bad would happen to the city, or that the people and leaders would pay for the sins that they committed. In response to Jeremiah's message, the leaders attacked him. He wanted to stop speaking in the Lord's name. He wanted to be done with all the attacks.

Yet, the prophet could not stop being a prophet. This was what the Lord had appointed for him from the womb. If he stopped speaking in the Lord's name, he would not be attacked by the leaders, but he would not be true to himself. Jeremiah continued to speak in the Lord's name even though it meant trouble for him. The Word of God was like a fire burning in his heart, and he could barely contain that fire.

In the Gospel reading, the Lord explains that He is going to Jerusalem, where He will be handed over to the priests and be killed but on the third day be raised. The Lord explains that He is going to pour Himself out for those whom He loves. This is the what the Lord does in eternity: He pours Himself out of love for the Father. He will do so for His people. This is quite different than what St. Peter expects. St. Peter expects that the Lord will avoid suffering, rather than enter suffering. He expects that because the Lord is the Son of God, He will be protected from any suffering. The Lord Jesus explains that this is not what His heavenly Father has in mind. The Lord Jesus was going to speak the truth to the people. It did not matter that there were those who would reject His message. He would not disobey His Father's will. He needed to speak the truth. In doing so, He would pour Himself out for His people.

Those are the choices that face us in life. The Lord has appointed us for a specific vocation in life. We can either embrace that vocation, and accept the hardships that come with it, or we can reject that vocation. If we embrace the vocation to which God has called us, that does mean not everyone will like it. Sometimes that vocation is going to entail suffering. That is true of any vocation: there are times in marriage, priesthood, diaconate, or religious life when we can be disappointed or hurt, when we might feel like it is each of us against the world. We are not alone, because we can see in Jeremiah's soul a desire to stop being a prophet, and yet the realization that he cannot give up. The Lord Jesus Himself embraced the desolation of being alone, of dying for people who were and are ungrateful for what He did.

The good news is that when we embrace that vocation to which God has called us, when we give ourselves to God and others in service, we find ourselves. The Lord tells us, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” It is a paradox, that we find ourselves by giving ourselves, and by focusing upon others, but that is the paradox of sacrificial love.

If we know the vocation to which God has called us, but we avoid it out of fear, or we think that it would be better to take what the world offers us instead of what God offers us, we will not be happy. We will not find the sense of purpose and fulfillment that we need. Instead, we will be restless, afraid of doing what God has designed for us to be happy, stuck between unhappiness and fear. That is not what we want, and God does not want that for us either.

If we hold back giving ourselves to others and serving those in need, we are not imitating the Lord Jesus, and we will not be happy. The Lord Jesus holds nothing back in His love for the Father and for us. If we hold back when it comes to giving ourselves, then we will be stuck in fear rather than freedom. If we take and never give, if we focus selfishly on what we need and ignore others, we will not fulfill the purpose we have in this life.

The question we ask ourselves this day: what do we fear? Feeling some apprehension about entering into a particular vocation is understandable, and even a good sign sometimes that a person is taking things seriously. However, the issue is not about experiencing fear, but about the ability to overcome fear. Jeremiah in his time did not succumb to his fear, or to his desire to stop, or to his doubts. He continued to speak the Lord’s words, even though the leaders did not listen at first. In time, Jeremiah was proved right, and the people later honored his heroism in the face of opposition. What if Jeremiah had quit? What if Jeremiah gave into his fear or doubts? It would have been disastrous not just for him, but for the whole people. The Lord Jesus spoke to the people and confronted the leadership in Jerusalem, even though it was a difficult road. Where would we be without the Lord’s sacrifice? We have times whenever we doubt, or maybe we want to give up. Yet the Lord calls us to persevere, because although we cannot see what fruit our sacrifices will bear, the Lord does.

As we approach the altar, we thank the Lord for those times when He has given us grace to bear sufferings, when His grace helped us to persevere. We ask Him to continue to show us His mercy for the times that we have failed, and we ask the Lord to help us make of our lives a sacrifice of praise to Him, to help us persevere even when others do not understand.