

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 18/2013

Jeremiah 38: 4-6, 8-10; Hebrews 12: 1-4; Luke 12; 49-53

Introduction

A lady had a parrot that was using bad language. So as punishment she put it in the freezer for a few minutes. When she took it out, it was shivering with cold and very quiet. She asked: “Do you promise never to use that kind of language again?” The parrot said: “Yes, I’ve learned my lesson. I promise. But I have just one question.” The woman said: “What is that?” The parrot asked: “What terrible thing did that turkey do?”

Today’s *first reading* shows Jeremiah being subjected to punishment; he is thrown into a deep well. He was treated this way because he had carried out his responsibility as a prophet. A prophet is not someone who foretells the future. A prophet is a person who speaks the truth even when others don’t want to hear it. It was the year 588 B.C. King Zedekiah, a weak and indecisive king, had been led by flatterers into an unwinnable war against the powerful Chaldeans. Jeremiah speaks the truth to him. He tells him his only course is to surrender. This honesty almost costs Jeremiah his life; only the intervention of an influential foreigner saves him. In the *Gospel* Jesus tells us quite plainly that if we are going to be faithful to him, we too will sometimes have to be prophets and take unpopular stands. What is involved in being a prophet? Several things.

First, Being a Prophet Means Standing Up for the Truth

People often use language to conceal the truth. It is shocking to look back and see how respected scientists and medical doctors in Nazi Germany tried to fool even themselves by misusing language to describe what they were doing. They justified the direct killing of mentally disabled children, and then of adults, by referring to them as “life unworthy of life.” They killed other persons who were described as “hereditarily sick.” It was but a step from this to the view that all Jewish people were a “diseased organ” on the body of mankind. These were not just a few fanatics who said such things; this was the majority of the medical profession.

Today too we often misuse language to disguise the direct killing of the unborn, referring to it simply as the “termination of a pregnancy” and, the direct killing of the elderly or seriously ill, calling it “mercy killing”. To be a prophet means to call such procedures what they are, “murder”. It also means to call many movies and TV programs, not “adult entertainment” but rather what they are, dirty or unchaste presentations. It means to call certain economic policies, not “reallocation of resources” or “sound financial management” but what they really are, greed, the preferring of money to the needs of people. It means to avoid the trap of “political correctness” and say instead what we honestly believe. It means don’t tell lies to yourself, like “I don’t have time”, for example, to go to Mass or to confession, because we all know that we have time for anything we regard as truly important in life.

Second, Being a Prophet Means Working for Justice.

Dom Helder Camara, the long-time bishop of Recife in Brazil, used to say: “When I give the poor bread, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no bread, they call me a communist.” Many people will give to charity and support food banks, for example, but don’t want to hear about justice. We do indeed have to do the works of

charity. However it takes genuine prophets to insist also that our laws and our social programs must protect the unemployed, the vulnerable, the sick, the single parents, as justice requires, even if that means we have to pay more taxes to support such programs.

Third, Being a Prophet Means Making Choices

If we are truly Christians and Catholics then we will encounter situations every day in which we have to choose between following the crowd and following the Gospel. A great Christian thinker of the 19th century, Soren Kierkegaard, insisted that you cannot talk away the differences between Christianity and many of our social practices. Every day we have to make real choices.

Fourth, Being a Prophet Means Taking Sides

There are many situations in daily life in which one side is right and the other side is wrong, where one side is true and the other side is false. The great temptation for us is to say: "I'm a person of peace; I just mind my business." Yet not to take sides in those situations is to go along with injustice or error. Every day we have to be courageous and take sides.

Finally, Being a Prophet Means Being a Witness

At our baptism we were presented with a lighted candle to indicate that, as people joined to Christ by this sacrament, we now have the responsibility of making his light shine on our world so that people can see the right road to follow. Every day we have to bear witness to Christ by the way we live.

Conclusion

The *second* reading today contains a great image. It pictures us as running a race. We are urged to strip ourselves of sin and every thing else that holds us back from giving our best. And as we run, striving to reach the goal, we are told that God's heroes, the saints and martyrs who have already run the race before us, are sitting in the stands cheering us on. That is the image to call to mind whenever we find ourselves tempted to give up on the important role of being true prophets.