

Twentieth Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Jer 38:4-6, 8-10

Heb 12:1-4

Ps 40

Lk 12:49-53

The prophet: the voice of true friendship

The prophet Jeremiah in our first reading found himself in a dire situation, thrown into a cistern to die in the muck because his prophesying was intolerable to the political leaders of ancient Israel. Let me paraphrase the content of Jeremiah's prophesying, drawn here and there from the book and Jeremiah:

~Your political allegiances are offensive to the Lord. You align yourselves with those whose power and policies you think will save the country, but you are mistaken. You take the side of the powerful and the rich and join them in depriving the poor of the help they need. You hold the widow and the orphan responsible for their sorry state, while you excuse and cheer those whose sins are known and manifest. You give no welcome to the stranger, but treat them with contempt and exclude them from your society. Your allegiances, political and otherwise, are foreign to all that the Lord has taught you in the law and in the prophets. They are an abomination and a disgrace. Repent and turn to the Lord or you will lose everything.~

This is a fair summary, I think, of the kind of thing the prophet Jeremiah had been proclaiming in the years before the Babylonians destroyed Israel as a nation. But so you may not doubt me, listen to this brief passage from Jeremiah 7 (v 4-7), where Jeremiah relays God's message to the house of Israel before the temple gates:

Do not put your trust in these deceptive words: “The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord!” Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds; if each of you deals justly with your neighbor; if you no longer oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow; if you no longer shed innocent blood in this place or follow after other gods to your own harm, only then will I let you continue to dwell in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors long ago and forever.

“Temple of the Lord! Temple of the Lord! Temple of the Lord!” may have been a sort of rally chant that served to stoke patriotic feeling among the Israelites. But what it really did was numb them against the prophet’s message. It was a bit of clever propaganda – both political and religious – that served the faithless and plotting princes of Israel, but not the God of Israel. Which is why the Lord told Jeremiah to tell the people not to trust in such deceptive words: they were no more than cynical slogans.

You can understand why a certain sector of the powers-that-be in Israel sought to punish the prophet. They tried to have him put to death rather than to be confronted in their consciences with the weight of his words. Well, not exactly his words, but the words that the Lord God had given to Jeremiah to proclaim.

Jeremiah, who was a loyal Israelite, loved his fellow countrymen and his country. But he loved God more. But we must not imagine that Jeremiah relished the role of the prophet, of being a voice of

resistance and reproach and contradiction. Listen to how Jeremiah anguishes over the role that God had chosen for him:

Whenever I speak, I must cry out,
 violence and outrage I proclaim.
The word of the Lord has brought me
 reproach and derision all day long.
I say I will not mention him,
 I will no longer speak in his name.
But then it is as if fire is burning in my heart,
 imprisoned in my bones.
I grow weary holding back,
 I cannot! (Jer 20:8-9)

All the prophets suffered for speaking God's word to God's people, and Jeremiah was no exception. The prophets, chosen to do God's will and speak God's word, suffered for their chosenness. It is little wonder, then, that they resisted, at least initially, God's call, but ultimately to no avail. The truth and power of the divine word burned through them, overcame their resistance, and prevailed. This was true of the prophets, to their glory. But, sadly, the same cannot be said for the people and their princes. The word of God had no such effect on them, for their loyalties lay elsewhere, despite their pious words and patriotic chants to the contrary.

Who is the prophet Jeremiah? He, like Jesus centuries later, is one who brings about division, not because he wants to divide, but because it is the role of the prophet to be faithful to God, as he is

sent by God to speak God's word, whenever and wherever God's people do not want to hear it. The prophet is a catalyst. He does not cause the division; he only hastens its manifestation. The division is already there, already happening: between those who are faithful to God and those who are not.

It's not the role of the prophet to stand *with* the people and to denounce their enemies without. Standing together with your team, with those on your side, against your opponents comes naturally. With minimal effort, we band together, and together we all face the same direction and confront the enemy, call out their evil and wrongdoing, show our disapproval and opposition.

But the role of the prophet is different. The prophet must turn and face his own. He must call his own friends to account, his own team, his own side, his own people, his own country. And from this position, his own, mistaken, can take him for an enemy, because he faces and confronts, must be faced and reckoned with. But the prophet is not against those to whom he is sent. He is not against his own. He is for them. Sometimes he alone is truly for them. And yet he does not fail to see that his own are in the wrong or have done wrong or have gone wrong. And so he calls them to account – to repent, to reform, to return. And for this, the hard of heart hate him, brand him disloyal, and plot against him.

To take a stand against your own team, your own side, your own people when they're in the wrong, this is where real courage comes

in, for you risk being ostracized, demonized, pilloried. You risk being misunderstood, deliberately and intentionally and calculatingly. And like Jeremiah, you may even risk whispering campaigns and plots to get rid of you. Perhaps you will get thrown into a cistern, called a traitor, denounced as a demoralizer who is not interested in the welfare, but in the ruin of “our people.”

But this mistreatment will not be to the prophet’s shame. It will be to the shame of those whose ways were not those of God, but the ways of the world and its princelings. It will be to the shame of those who resisted, refused, and abused the prophet sent by God to call them back to the ways of God.

As faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus, who is the prophet of prophets, we are meant to “consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that [we] may not grow weary and lose heart” (12:3) as we heard in our second reading from the letter to the Hebrews. For each of us, baptized into our Lord Jesus Christ, is already given the grace of being a prophet. We are made prophets, a prophetic people, by his grace. And to whom much is given, much will be expected.

So then, where prophets see sin, they must denounce it. Where prophets sees wrongdoing, they must name it as such. Where prophets see their own going astray, they must call them to task and to return to the way of the Lord. This is neither treason, nor betrayal, nor disloyalty. It is, in a word, love.

If an enemy tells us the truth about ourselves, we balk and ignore, and we are hardened in our commitment to error and falsehood. A weakling friend will let us tell lies about ourselves and offer no opposition, no correction, but even maybe encourage us in them, and we fill our hearts with a false satisfaction and cheerfulness even as we walk to our reckoning (Esolen, *Touchstone*, March/April 2025).

The prophet – who is neither enemy nor weakling friend – must stand up to his own, to his fellow countrymen, to his friends, for he is a real and true friend to them. “It takes the true friend to let you speak, and to say, with a gentle but firm voice, that you haven’t got things right. Such a friend may act as that voice we wish very much would be quiet, namely, the voice of conscience” (Esolen, *idem*). The prophet seeks to awaken and rouse our conscience, especially when we have numbed it to the realities around us.

Well, it is long past time for us Christians to stop being weakling friends who allow our neighbors and family and friends to tell themselves lies or to repeat the lies of those who have lied to them. It is time for us Christians to act with prophetic strength and boldness, and to stand up to our own when they are in the wrong, and to do this for their sakes, because we are their friends, because we want them to return to the ways of God rather than to wander off into exile, far from God.

See something. Say something. This is basically the work of the prophet, which we should and must imitate. *See something*. Stop

pretending you're not seeing what's happening. No more doubt. No more denial. Trust yourself and your eyes. *Say something.* Enough with the polite reserve, with fearing to give offense. Just say calmly but firmly: "This is not right. We're better than that. This is not who we are. We must change. We must do better." If something does not seem right to you, sit right with you, then the time for prophetic courage may be upon you, a time to speak, a time to act.

Jeremiah was the one true friend to his people and country in a time of crisis. But because they would not listen and trusted in their own cleverness rather than in the wisdom of God, they suffered defeat and destruction. Maybe if there had been a dozen Jeremiahs, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand Jeremiahs... maybe. Or maybe not. After all, the Son of Man has come to bring not peace, but division.

"Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mt 11:15).