

12th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A – 2020

Jer 20:10-13 Rom 5:12-15 Mt 10:26-33

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

First Reading (Jer 20:10-13). Jeremiah's outcry 'terror from every side' (20:3) is now turned against him in derision and mockery. People who once were his friends have now turned against him, hoping to see his downfall so that they can take their revenge on him. Jeremiah, however, keeps faith in God, confident that God will vindicate him. However, he sees his vindication as involving the downfall of his enemies and prays for vengeance. In this respect Jeremiah was a man of his time and must be judged accordingly. Nevertheless, Christians have always seen him as a figure of Christ and Christians who suffer in bringing Christ's message to the world are meant to draw inspiration from him. The close relationship between witness and suffering is the connection with the Gospel.

Gospel (Mt 10:26-33). This is the second extract from the Mission Sermon (10:1-42) given by Jesus to the Apostles before he sent them out. Here he exhorts his disciples to open and fearless proclamation of the Gospel. What he tells them during periods of private instruction must be given the greatest publicity by the disciples on mission. Anticipating the kind of persecution and possible martyrdom that will greet the Apostles in the future, Jesus urges them to have complete trust in the Father, who knows every detail of their lives. The exposure to death must not frighten them. If the Father watches over the life and death of even his smallest and least valuable creatures (sparrows were the cheapest edible birds), how much more will he watch over his children in all their trials. As long as the Apostles are faithful to their mission, they have nothing to fear, not even death itself. Faithful disciples will be vindicated by the Father in heaven.

Second Reading (Rom 5:12-15). St Paul draws a contrast between Christ and Adam: sin came into the world through Adam; abundant grace came through Jesus Christ. Paul says that 'the gift far outweighed the fall'. This thought is echoed in the Exultet in the Easter vigil: 'O happy fault, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!'

Reflection

The words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading have been described as "the call to courageous confession." Jesus says, "Do not be afraid of the power of the world. It can touch only the body, not the soul. If the disciples live with fear, they should fear the one who can destroy both body and soul. As far as God is concerned, they are much more valuable than the birds of the air who are well treated by God. God knows them and every hair on their head. As a result of their trust in God, they should recognize God's great concern for them and have no fear. Those who proclaim Christ before the world will find Christ acknowledging them in heaven, while the ones who deny Christ before the world will find Christ disowning them in heaven. Maybe we can see an additional meaning in Jesus's words. The early Church would suffer persecution and terrible tortures. In fact, persecution has been a feature of the Church's life through the centuries.

The times without persecution or opposition are really the exceptions. Jeremiah's experiences of terror and conspiratorial whispering on every side in today's first reading are all too real throughout the life of the Church. We can recall the example of St. Thomas More who was put to death under Henry VIII. We tend to romanticize those days as "merry old England" but in those days, England was filled with spies. A word against the king overheard in a pub on the street could transport you into prison. Persecution like this is still going in many parts of the world today.

There is another kind of persecution going on that will never hurt the hair of your head but it can destroy your soul. Who are these people of whom we should really be worried? We should be afraid of those who can destroy our fidelity in marriage, our trust in others; who can destroy our faith, our spiritual life; who can destroy our commitment to truth and honesty; who can destroy our sense of generosity and responsibility for others; who can destroy respect for the dignity of sexuality and for human life; who can destroy our values, our hopes, our following of Christ; who can destroy our self-respect by addicting us to drugs, alcohol or pornography.

The modern day persecution will never ever bruise the body. They don't use any instruments of torture. But, what they do use are movies, sarcasm, humour, music, situation comedies, selective publicity of wrongdoing, the creation of cultural heroes who are steeped in materialism and amoral behaviour, advertising jingles, soap operas, jokes, fashions and novels, all to eat away at everything we consider holy and sacred. These are the modern day persecutors we should fear not because they can harm our body, but because they can damage our soul. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid of those who can kill only the body. Rather worry about the one who can kill body and soul."

Fear is something we all have to cope with. All those who have accomplished great things have known fear at one time or another. Little wonder that the phrase "Do not be afraid" occurs 366 times in the Bible. Fear is not necessarily a bad thing. Fear sometimes has a protective function – it warns us of the presence of danger. In this case, fear is a grace. But fear can be a handicap. It can make cowards of us. Fear is the enemy of faith. Fear is the measure of our lack of faith.

All those who have accomplished great things have had to overcome fear. Take the example of the prophet Jeremiah (First Reading). He lived out his vocation during a time of great turmoil, which saw the defeat of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. He lived with constant threats to his life. Fear followed him around like a shadow. Yet, in spite of everything, he remained faithful to his calling. What was it that enabled him to overcome his fear and remain faithful to his mission? It was the conviction that God was on his side: 'The Lord is at my side, the mighty hero.' Therefore, he committed his cause to God.

When Jesus sent his Apostles out to proclaim his teaching openly, they knew they would have to undergo persecution and possible martyrdom. Naturally they were afraid. Jesus understood their fears. So, not once but three times he said to them, "Do not be afraid." In saying this he was addressing their fears and trying to allay them. He was trying to move them beyond fear, knowing that fear could make them so timid as to be unable to fulfil their mission. How did he suggest they might overcome their fear? He urged them to have complete trust in God. He assured them that God knew every detail of their lives, and would support them in their crisis. The exposure to death must not frighten them. If the Father watches over the life and death of the smallest and least valuable creatures (sparrows), how much more will he watch over his children in all their trials. The Lord is at our side too. We mustn't allow our fear to cripple us. To live a

Christian life requires courage. But then any meaningful living requires courage. What is needed in life is not so much heroism as ordinary courage.

Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without it we can't practice any other virtue with constancy. Faith is a great source of courage. To be a disciple one needs a brave heart. As people of faith, we believe that God will give us the strength to cope with whatever comes. Fear and courage are not mutually exclusive. They can coexist. Courage is being afraid and carrying on in spite of it. Only God can allay our deepest fears. If we keep our eyes directed at God we will be able to move beyond fear to trust. The fact that our cause is right gives us great strength.

In today's world, we Christians are more and more likely to encounter problems. The values of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus and of the Church, are now being spurned in our world and called into question. If we cling to these teachings and words, we are accused of being people of hate and of promoting "hate speech." This condition in our world will most likely only increase.

Christians are already the most persecuted group in the world. We should not want to abandon our faith in order to avoid being rejected, mocked, scorned and judged by others. Most of us want a simple and quiet life to live in peace. That simplicity and quietness may well be taken away from us today. The challenge for us is to hold fast to the words of Jesus: "Fear no one." That also means that we must cling to the teachings of the Lord Jesus without any fear or even without concern for what may happen to our lives.

Let us be ready to walk with the Lord to suffering and death, rejoicing that we are found worthy to suffer for clinging to the words and the teachings of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Missing all of you very much! I wish you and your family a great week!

God bless you and your family always. Hope the pandemic will be over soon and we will be able to see each other in person.

Yours sincerely,

Fr Tao Pham