

**“Jeremiah: Fear and Courage”**  
**Fr. Thomas Esposito, O. Cist.**  
**June 25, 2017**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Christ the King/Abbey**  
**Jer 20:10-13; Rom 5:12-15; Mt 10:26-33**

Most human beings, I suspect (myself included), suffer from a more or less chronic spirit of cowardice. We have no difficulty finding motivation to impress our neighbors with our new phone or our in-depth knowledge of current fads or topics; we love to subtly remind our friends of our intellectual brilliance; and we are quite adept at scheming ways to get more money and self-promoting attention at work. But when it comes to caring for our immortal soul, to allowing ourselves to be boldly led by the Lord rather than our ego, to praying honestly for proper self-knowledge and insight to change what needs to be changed, we easily cave to a host of relentless and senseless fears, both internal and external.

Regarding the life of virtue, anxiety about the whisperings of others and concern for appearances will often lead us to do what is popular rather than what is right— it will also lead us to avoid doing what is right even if it is not popular. Children hear something like that in school all the time, but adults need to hear it as well, because adults are simply children who no longer have the excuse of youth for their selfish actions or their cowardice. Regarding the spiritual life, the fear of relinquishing control, of fully confiding in the only One worthy of confidence, creates a cozy cocoon of mediocrity in which we so often pray mechanically and absent-mindedly, and never development as God created us to.

Yet our anxieties seem to be justified when we take note of the demands God places on his prophets, apostles, and saints. Jeremiah certainly had no fear of his so-called friends now ranged on every side to take vengeance on him for pricking their consciences. His happiness was hardly measured by success or popularity (he had none of either!); if it were, he would have encouraged his contemporaries to continue paying lip-service to God in the Temple while worshiping other gods and living without a thought for the divine once they left the Temple area. Yet for all his tenacious fidelity to the right worship of God, he lived and died very much alone. A solitary prophet forecasting the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians, his was a tragic life lacking even the certain hope of Heaven. In the verses immediately following today’s first reading, Jeremiah will not hesitate to curse the day of his birth. And yet it is the brazen

courage of Jeremiah to preach without much hope that his listeners will convert which the Church highlights for us in this Sunday's first reading.

Among Jewish interpreters of Scripture, Jeremiah is often considered a candidate for the role of the Suffering Servant in the book of Isaiah. If Isaiah had in mind a definite historical person, Jeremiah is a distinct possibility. He himself writes about himself, "Yet I was like a trusting lamb led to slaughter, not knowing that they were hatching plots against me," quite similar language to what we find in Isaiah 53: "But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed [...] Like a lamb led to slaughter or a sheep silent before shearers, he did not open his mouth." This language, of course, is applied to Jesus in the midst of his passion and death, thus making Jeremiah a credible type, or preview, of Jesus.

We instinctively box Jeremiah and the other strange prophets of the Old Testament in tightly sealed mental containers, safely locking them away in the antiquated attic of our own faith tradition. After all, if this is what is required of God's prophets, of those divine spokespersons who acknowledge the Lord before others, no wonder so few of us are willing to devote our entire being to the God who made that being and demands that it be returned entirely to Him. We are understandably afraid of entrusting to God every breath, every word, every action that might require us to loosen our grip on our lives, our desires, and even our precious fears which we often cling to more ferociously than we do our own faith.

There might not seem to be a message of hope in all of this- but there is one to be found! There is a certain consolation that comes from knowing that we are worth more than many sparrows! (I like to imagine Thomas the apostle being fairly nonplussed by the comparison, asking Jesus to raise people to just a slightly higher dignity than a bunch of weeny little birds!) But the greater cause for hope lies in the example and consolation Christ surely provided his own disciples, who in turn encourage us to persevere in glorifying the Lord with a courageous and calm heart. St. Peter exhorts us, "Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly."

These words must embolden us and strengthen our wills for the daily attacks upon our fears and pride within, but also on our faith from the outside. The saints, after all, are the most trustworthy interpreters of Scripture, and their translation of the Word of God into heroic virtue must always inspire us to do the same. We can only learn to rejoice with the saints when we have

shed the fear which cripples our consciences and shrivels our courage. In tandem with the words of Scripture, we can rise to the heights of spiritual and virtuous heroism; it is possible; *but only if we desire it more than we desire to cling to our comfortable fears and selfish wants*. Desperate times call not for desperate measures (whatever that means), but for saints, ordinary people who respond with extraordinary courage to the call God puts on their hearts.

We can begin this translation by praying daily for the simple desire to acknowledge Christ and fear no one, imploring the Lord to shower His “gracious gift” upon us in our weakness. We can say, simply but truly: “Lord, I am afraid. Make me fearless, like a trusting child learning to walk, supported by its parents. What in me is dark illumine, so that what you say to me in my darkness I may speak in the light for others. And never cease to enkindle in me the desire to shed my mediocrity and embrace the saintly path you are pointing out to me and wish me to walk down, eagerly walking toward your glory.” Amen.