

Fourth Sunday of the Year January 31, 2016

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30

The theme of the liturgy of today is the prophetic call from God given to each individual personally. Through this call God communicates his message of love to all. John tells us that God loved the world so much that he gave his only son for our sake that we may have life through him. This is the sacrificial love and a caring love. It is love that enables us to be compassionate, understanding, patient, forgiving and accepting others. Love sustains us with courage, with power to endure and carries us confidently through every challenge. God is concerned about each one of us and that he chooses to give himself to us. In our life God keeps on challenging us to prophetically confront suffering and division, to help the world lead to suffering and new life. Jeremiah in today's first reading is directed to give a prophetic witness to God, whose saving justice and compassion yearn to steer a wayward, stressed-out people away from impending disaster. Warned about the obstacles he will face, Jeremiah is instructed by God to stand firm. Jesus as prophet in today's Gospel challenges his own people to a new way of living, a new way of seeing things. However the people while they are expecting the newness through the messiah reject the very means to reach the wholeness, freedom and peace they have been seeking. They stubbornly resist to the prophetic invitation of Jesus to accept the wider vision of loving and accepting the kingdom of God. Paul in the second reading reveals that the key to doing this is love itself. Without love whatever we do or say will never touch others or move their hearts.

The First Reading of today tells us that Jeremiah's service to God begins with his receiving the word of God. Jeremiah hears God announce that he was chosen to be a prophet even before he was formed in his mother's womb. Here we have the dialogue between Yahweh and Jeremiah, which is a perfect example of Divine Love. Some of the Words that the Heavenly Father spoke are very touching. God tells the prophet of his personal choice from eternity. He says that even before he was born, God has consecrated him indicating his personal choice. Here God takes the initiative and calls Jeremiah to be the prophet. God is omniscient and he does everything with a purpose and the mission is very clear. Now the Prophet is called by God to stand firm for him and be his mouth piece. He is now the spokesperson of God to proclaim his message. He has to tell all what God has commanded him to do. When Jeremiah is scared at this command, God is present to support him and tells him not to be afraid because he will always be close to him. He gives him a sign saying that he will like a fortified city, like an iron pillar and strong as a

bronze wall. No political or earthly power can overcome him as God himself is his protector. Jeremiah cannot be discouraged as God will protect him. He has the important message to be given to the nations.

Today's Second Reading taken from the first Letter to the Corinthians. Paul speaks about the importance of the gifts of the Spirit which each one has received and says that love is the most important gift of all. Love indeed is a gift. Loving is an art which has to be received and nurtured. Love is defined as Eros or passionate love, philia or intimate love and Agape or unconditional divine love. Agape is the love that God has for every single person and the kind of love which should be the characteristic of the true follower of Christ in his/her relationship with people everywhere. Paul tells us that without agape none of other gifts of the Spirit have any value. Everything becomes empty. He then describes the characteristics of this true love: It is kind, not envious, not boastful, not arrogant, not rude, not self-willed, not irritable, and not resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but in truth, integrity and wholeness. In spite of all obstacles, it perseveres. It affirms the dignity of every single person, including their enemies. A life of love is more than a charism. It is a constant selfless caring for others whether one feels loving or not. It is the virtue of a true Christian and manifests itself in every circumstance. Paul says: "Love never fails."

The Gospel of today follows what we were reading last Sunday: Jesus was in Nazareth, his hometown, and he preached in the synagogue. Jesus, at the beginning of his public life, gave to the people, what today we would call his 'mission statement', using words of the prophet Isaiah. When Jesus proclaimed that the text from Isaiah he had read has been fulfilled in their hearing, he was in fact applying it to himself. The Messiah they have been waiting for was now present to them here in the person of Jesus and the words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled in him. His ministry was going to fulfil what the prophets had promised for centuries. His Kingdom has begun to be realised in his works of healing, of reconciliation and liberation from evil powers. What the Lord was saying truly touched his listeners, so much so that they were very surprised at the discourse given by someone they had once known and who, now, appeared to them as another man, a man unlike any other, a man who surpassed all others, for, in fact, he was at once God and man: "They wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth."

At first the crowd was absolutely amazed at Jesus' eloquence, and the interpretation of the scriptures. They were truly shocked and were not sure how to respond to his

words. His eloquence was beyond their expectations. At the same time they did discover that they were too familiar with him. They knew him too well and they know his parents too and the entire family history. They knew him as Jesus, a carpenter and the son of a carpenter, and how could he speak like this? Their expectations of Jesus were very human and what they saw in him was something extra ordinary. The tradition had told that when the messiah comes he will come from nowhere but here was the messiah they were too familiar with. Jesus knew that as soon as the implications of what he has said sink in, the people would be outraged. Hence he took them on the offensive. He knew that the people of Nazareth wanted him to do for them what he was reported to have done to the gentiles in Galilee. Jesus was not the one to oblige them.

Jesus told them that a prophet normally was not accepted in his own place. The two stories Jesus told, one about the action of Elijah caring for the widow in Zerephath during the famine caused by three and half years of drought and the other about Elisha, mediating a cure for Naaman the Syrian, particularly when the Syrians were the hated enemies of Israel, both showed God's prophets bypassing Israelites and helping the gentiles. This same prophetic call was given to Jesus and he saw it being fulfilled in his own ministry. This made the people of Nazareth angrier as Jesus was shunning out his own people and was reaching out to the outsiders. They felt that he had betrayed his own people. In a short time the people of Nazareth had gone from praising their own person to planning to kill him. Their efforts failed as Jesus filled with the spirit walks away quietly from the middle of them since his time had not come. This story of his rejection was just a beginning of the opposition he would receive throughout his life and his ministry. The people to whom Jesus was sent were the very people who rejected him. For Luke this has been a consistent pattern throughout the history of Israel. God sent his prophets with the message of salvation and the people rejected both the people and the message. While many of the Jews would reject the message of Jesus, the gentiles or the outsiders would accept it willingly and joyously. This in fact proves the text which spoke in the Synagogue before his own people. It also told them that the messianic age has come and they have to be alert or else the opportunity will be lost forever.

The implication was that the mission of Jesus cannot be limited to one social or religious group any more than God's love can. The people of Nazareth failed to understand that with God love begins wherever human need is found. No one was going to tell them that religion had to go so far as Elijah was travelling to Sidon or Elisha cleaning a Syrian or even Isaiah teaching good news to the poor and liberty

to the captives. Besides this, Jesus for them was a bundle of contradictions. His mission was weighed in favour of the poor, yet he dined with the wealthy. He reprimanded the disciples for being ambitious and yet called on them to be rich at heart and be at the service of the poor and hungry to give alms and feed when hungry. He made clear that his message was for all and no one was exempt from his call. His disciples themselves were chosen from every walk of life. In the Synagogue he challenged them and identified himself with the likes of Elijah and Elisha. This was blasphemous for the people. Yet in every word of his and every step he took there was the manifestation of divine love and this would remain with him till the end. Like Jesus, the most loving person who ever lived, we may find ourselves rejected, even hated and destroyed precisely because of our goodness and integrity.

Contemplating the scriptural readings of today we are able to perceive how God manifests His Divine love in a very personal way. Through the incarnation in Jesus Christ, God came to dwell among us. What great love God has for us, that He set aside His divinity, took human form upon Himself, and dwelled in our midst so we may come to know Him as He truly is, holy, perfect, eternal, merciful, forgiving, etc... There is no other like Him. St John in his Gospel explains the depth of God's love which is a sacrificial love and an all understanding event. It grants eternal life in and through him. When God came down to dwell among us, all did not accept the manifestation of His Divine love. In the Old Testament we see how the prophets were rejected in their hometown and by their own people. Now Jesus also experiences similar rejection by his own town's men. In the eyes of the people of His hometown, He did not meet their standards. Because they knew Him since His childhood, He was nothing special to them. This is true of all human situations where familiarity with the person does not allow a person to see beyond what is utterly human. The scriptures however assure us of God's presence within each one of us and the Gospel calls on us to help others to become aware of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is necessary for us to open our inner eyes to recognise the spirit.

The word of God tells us that the Son of God came to earth and took on flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary in order to save all men. But who has the greatest need for salvation? Is it not those who do not yet have any link to God, the True, and the only? The Jewish People had been elected by God to be his People: already, the fact of being Jewish established in them a certain link to God, a link of the corporeal order. Furthermore, he who was not Jewish lacked this link. But when the Son of God came to earth, he brought with him grace, a created divine good,

which was capable of establishing between God and any man or woman a link of the spiritual order. For John says that the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus.

The grace of God is almighty, and the words of grace that Jesus speaks to the inhabitants of his village truly have the power to convince everyone of this astounding fact: Jesus, one of their own, is not only man, but also, and first, God. However, a man, any man or woman, remains free with respect to the almighty grace of God: this is the Mystery of Love, this is the very Mystery of God! Now, Jesus knew in advance that the inhabitants of Nazareth would reject him, as Saint John wrote, speaking in a general manner: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not." This is why Jesus does not intend to perform any miracles in order to try to prove his divinity: a miracle is an exemption from the laws of nature, and God does not produce miracles in vain, for what he has created is good and perfect in itself, even if man and sin have corrupted this initial creation. Thus, Jesus will not perform the same miracles in Nazareth that he had in Capernaum. But there is more. Jesus, from the very start of his preaching, seems, to some extent, to want to leaven aside his people, the Jewish People, in order to give a certain preference to the people of the pagan nations. This is what the continuation of his discourse leads us to think...

This is the contradiction or paradox: the more loving we are, the more people our love embraces as we transcend labels and prejudices dividing people, the more likely we will be rejected, persecuted and hated - even by 'religious' people. On the one hand the message of Truth and Love has been rejected and has been attacked and abused but people have experienced a special strength to carry on. As the life of Jesus clearly indicates, there is a price to be paid for being a person of love but it is a price well worth paying. When the grace of God is offered to us, let us seize it! Let us fear that the grace of God may pass us by, never to return ... ever. In fact, the grace of God is destined for both the Jews and the pagan Nations. The first Disciples of Christ, the Apostles, were all Jews. Jesus did not want to reject his People, but rather he wanted grace to dominate in them, he wanted the corporeal link they had with God to be dominated by a link of a higher order, a spiritual one, that of grace.

The Parish Priest decided to visit one of his parishioners who had stopped coming to church. The priest found John in his garden under hot sun taking care of his roses and vegetables. Understanding the purpose of the visit of the Pastor John said: "Father, you tell us and he is correct. Then going round the garden he told

John, my friend you have some fine roses. That God knows everything. He knows my name, my existence and whether my soul will be saved or damned.” It is true said the priest. He knows us all and whole universe. Then said John what is the use of my coming for mass and all the boring service since God knows all and it is already destined. The priest told him that he has real good point and he agreed with him. Then going round the garden the priest said, John you have nice roses here and the vegetables look great. John felt proud and said that he takes good care day and night. Then the priest said look John we agreed that God knows all and all the future and past is known to him. Yes nodded John. If God knows all things why do you slog? He knows where your vegetables go and where the roses will reach tomorrow. Why do you slog then when all is determined by God? Man kept quiet. Next Sunday he was kneeling on the front row in the church.

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