

**This Sunday's Readings – 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time** – The life of a prophet/disciple is not an easy one as is evidenced in today's readings. It is also very easy to see the connection between today's first reading from Jeremiah and the Gospel passage from Matthew.

Today's first reading is from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was born sometime around 650 BC and prophesized up and beyond the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC (the beginning of the Babylonian Captivity). He briefly remained amongst the ruins of Jerusalem until forced to flee to Egypt by Jewish conspirators. There, tradition has it, his own people murdered him. The Book of Jeremiah, as we know it, was assembled shortly after his death. Jeremiah and Jesus are often identified together, as each was persecuted by and suffered under their enemies. Preaching the word of God is not the best way to make friends and influence people. Jeremiah preached against the infidelity of the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah and their kings. That made him a marked man. Even his friends deserted him and tried to trap him. Now, Jeremiah is near despair. Yet he still firmly believes that God will not let his enemies prevail over him - "they will not triumph". He asks the Lord to "let me witness the vengeance you take on them, for to you I have entrusted my cause". Devout Jews at this time (6<sup>th</sup> century BC) that there was no heaven or hell or any afterlife as we know it. It would be approximately 400 years later in the Book of Daniel that resurrection and an afterlife would be introduced. Therefore, if the Lord did not punish Jeremiah's enemies while he was alive, then Jeremiah would have considered that a punishment, not a reward. He, therefore, instructs the people to not give up during persecution. Trust in God will bring them through it. Reginald Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment – "This reading has clearly been chosen to match the gospel, which speaks of the persecution that the apostles will encounter on their mission. Jeremiah was preeminently the prophet who suffered persecution because of his prophetic activity. His fate influenced the development of the later Jewish view that rejection, persecution, and martyrdom were inseparable from the prophetic vocation, a view echoed in a number of dominical sayings (Luke [11:51](#); [13:33-34](#); Mark [12:1-9](#)). To be a bearer of the word of God means to suffer, because that word inevitably encounters hostility and rejection". In his 2002 syndicated column for *The Messenger*, Fr. Roger Karban comments on the afterlife in today's first reading – "Reflecting on his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah gradually comes to the conclusion that Yahweh isn't going to save him from the turmoil his prophesying has created. Though he ends these few lines by reminding us of Yahweh's track record — "He has rescued the life of the poor from the power of the wicked." — he's fairly certain that his life isn't going to be rescued from anyone. As a believing Jew, Jeremiah's convinced that Yahweh eventually will punish his persecutors — "They will stumble, they will not triumph." But as a believing Jew of the sixth century, B.C.E., he's also convinced that there's no afterlife as we know it today: no heaven, no hell. All rewards and punishments have to be given and received in this life. That's why he prays, "Let me witness the vengeance you take on them, for to you I have entrusted my cause." According to Jeremiah's theology, dying before Yahweh punishes his persecutors is a punishment, not a reward".

Today's Gospel reading is from Matthew. This is the second of three consecutive Sunday's dedicated to Jesus "Mission Discourse" (10:1 – 42). Jesus is instructing the Apostles before He sends them on their first mission that the life of a disciple is not an easy one. By proclaiming the Word of God, they will be persecuted and many will die for their faith, but their faith in God will bring them through it. Jesus constantly tells His apostles "do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul". By courageously proclaiming the Word in the face of persecution and death, the Lord will always be with them. Their reward will be great as they will attain the Kingdom of God. They will have everlasting life. Reginald Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment – "While they are on duty delivering their message, they will be guarded, but even this does not exclude martyrdom. One way or another, the message will be delivered. That is what is important. In other synoptic versions of the final saying (v. 33), a distinction is drawn between Jesus and the Son of man, though the relation between the two figures is one of functional identity. For the earlier tradition, Jesus was a figure on earth, and the Son of man was a transcendent figure in heaven. The resurrection revealed their identity, and Matthew carries this to its logical conclusion by substituting "I" for the Son of man on the transcendent side. The apostle's testimony on earth, whether given or shirked, will determine his fate at the end. The whole section is an exhortation to faithful and courageous testimony even in the face of suffering and persecution, presumably a very relevant message for Matthew's Church". In his 2002 syndicated column for *The Messenger*, Fr. Roger Karban comments on today's Gospel reading – "Thankfully, Jesus doesn't share Jeremiah's belief about an afterlife. As a believing Pharisee of the first century, C.E., he's convinced there's a life beyond the one we're presently living. So when his followers in Matthew's community find themselves in turmoil because of their prophetic words and lifestyle, he can assure them, "Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul. . . . Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven . . . ." Jesus knows that, for many of his followers, fear of what other people will do to them when they live their faith is reason enough not to live their faith. That's why he's quick to tell them, "Do not let anyone intimidate you. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nothing hidden that will not become known. What I tell you in darkness, speak in the light. What you hear in private, proclaim from the housetops." According to our early Christian authors, the pain Jesus' disciples experience can never compare to the life Jesus' disciples experience".

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments regarding today's Gospel reading – "For all practical purposes, there was no privacy in ancient village life. Everyone minded everybody else's business. Crowds followed Jesus even when he sought out deserted places (Matt 14:13). Village children were trained to spy out the secrets of other families while keeping the secrets of their own families intact. The common suspicion in this society is that if one does not know what others are up to, they must be up to no good. They surely must be plotting something that would damage everyone in the village. Jesus chided his disciples for trying to keep the children away from him (Matt 19:13-15) because he didn't want to create the impression that he was trying to hide something. Given the prevalence of secrecy and deception in this society, how could one ever know when to believe another person? People resorted

to various strategies to persuade others that they were indeed telling the truth. One strategy was to call God as witness. Ruth seeks to assure her mother-in-law, Naomi, that she truly intends to remain with her rather than return to her family by saying: “May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you” (Ruth 1:17). The fact that one of the commandments prohibits summoning God to witness a lie (“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God . . .”; Exod 20:7) suggests that even oaths did not guarantee that truth was being told. [Today’s gospel](#) is good news indeed: God the patron will uncover everything that is covered and will reveal all secrets (10:26). To enjoy these benefits, one had best acknowledge publicly that Jesus is God’s favored broker (10:32).

#### GOD-GIVEN HONOR

Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel (6:1-18), Jesus criticized the Pharisees who drew attention to their fasting, almsgiving, and praying in order to be seen by others and thereby to win honor from the crowds. Although the Pharisees behaved in culturally acceptable fashion, Jesus urges his disciple to do these same good deeds “in secret” (Matt 6:1-18). With this advice, Jesus redefines honor, his culture’s core value. Honor is a public claim to worth and a public acknowledgment of that claim. The Pharisaic almsgiving, prayer, and fasting behavior is normal and expected. Jesus teaches rather that honor bestowed by God is far superior to that which humans give. Do good deeds to win honor from God rather than from human beings! Here is yet another example where Jesus’ teaching is counter-structural rather than counter-cultural. He doesn’t discard honor, which would be a counter-cultural move. Rather he retains honor but redefines it by showing that God determines what is truly honorable. Americans cherish their privacy. They sue tabloid newspapers that invade it. They are shocked when they learn of the existence of storehouses of information gathered without their knowledge and consent about their spending habits, their financial situations, and the like. How would Americans respond to Jesus’ good news that all secrets will someday be revealed?”

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