

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time....*Do Not Be Afraid!*

My mother was brought up by her mother who held the office of a licenced Catechist in the Church of England. As I think back now, it is perhaps as a result of this upbringing, that from time to time she would have a particularly biblical turn of phrase. One of the phrases she would regularly use was directed towards people who she thought were being particularly negative in their statements, attitudes, or fears, in a rather disparaging way, with eyes lifted upwards, she would say they are being a “ Real Jeremiah ! ”.

I wonder if today we can identify with Jeremiah's commentary of what it means to live with that sense of experiencing the feeling of “terror on every side”. Jeremiah's was called to be a prophet by God when he was just a young boy. God demanded much from Jeremiah, he was to speak to ordinary people but also warn people in power of the danger and doom that would come their way, he was to deal with kings and tell them that their kingdom was going to be destroyed and they would lose everything and that would in fact be taken in chains as exiles in foreign lands. This message was to be given to them at a time when everyone was enjoying the good life in relative safety and security....well you can imagine it's not going to be well received or end well for poor Jeremiah. Jeremiah suffers badly, he is persecuted, and treated as an outcast. Nobody likes to hear bad news, particularly when it relates to them or involves them changing their ways! Jeremiah in turn is not a happy man, at one stage he even accuses God of abandoning him, and his situation is so bad that he wishes he'd never been born. Life is indeed hard for a true prophet.

His prophesies inevitably came to pass, but thank goodness there is a glimmer of hope amidst all the doom and gloom, as God, through his faithful, albeit very unhappy prophet, assures the people that they will indeed one day eventually be released from their captivity, they will indeed return to their homes, but now they will have learnt to have new and undivided hearts, and they will have in place real and well-founded relationships with their God.

It can be a challenge, I think, to hold firm to a message of God plan for humanity. Even on a personal level we can empathise with Jeremiah and perhaps feel surrounded by terror or fear. We wonder how we can make a positive difference when surrounded by world conflicts, racial protests, riots, suffering and death from a pandemic caused by an invisible foe, cultural wars, we fear worsening environmental concerns, we hear of money printing to avert potential financial disaster, we are acutely aware of the seemingly insurmountable and unmet needs of the world's poor and disadvantaged, we live with the struggles of even our beloved institution to right the wrongs perpetrated by the misuse of power and human failings, and the list goes on and on! But just perhaps it is at this time we pause for a moment and remember Jeremiah's words of consolation, and remind ourselves that what we have to do primarily is begin at the beginning, by building or rebuilding that real relationship and trust in God, just as the people in Jeremiah's day learnt to do through his prophesy no matter how difficult it was to hear and experience. So with this positive note we turn to our second reading today and Saint Paul and his message to the Romans.

Romans is, I think, not a particularly easy book to read, let alone understand, but nevertheless it contains a wonderful theology and in my experience it is well worth persisting with. There are some complex ideas behind Paul's theology, we are thinking here about Creation and Adam and Eve, and the Fall, and Sin, and what we call Original Sin, and Atonement. Saint Paul speaks of Adam as one who is like Jesus Christ, in that they both made choices that universally impacted and affected humankind. Adam's choice broke God's command, but Jesus's choice, his "free gift" made things right again. His free gift brought grace and the opportunity for salvation and true and faithful relationship with God, to everyone, all humankind. Central to this message and consolation is that God through his Son and the coming of the Holy Spirit does not ever wish to leave us alone. When faced with sin God's response is grace and mercy and no one can limit the love of God. Scripture is quite clear as to where our life's purpose and security is to be found; in Jesus Christ and in our faith response to Grace given to us in His name. So with this said we can turn finally to our Gospel passage for today.

How many times, do you think, does Jesus tell us “not to fear” in this reading and other bible passages?

To save you diving for the lexicon, let me tell you;.....one for every day of the year...three hundred and sixty five times, using a variety of similar phrases. And further still we hear that even all the hairs of our heads are counted by God, (I admit this would not take God very long with my bald head!)... but the point is clear, God knows us intimately, much, much, more than we know ourselves, God loves each of us down to the tiniest detail, and God’s love is infinite.

So we need not be fearful people, but we do need to be responsible people, and this responsibility concerns our ability to receive the love of God into our lives. This is not forced upon us, like from the very beginning of creation it is always our free choice, but we should know that each human being is created with the capacity to be a dwelling place for God and his love. We can never be fully human unless the greatest value in each of our lives is to receive the love of God and give it to the people around us and if each of us is created to be a place where God and his love can dwell and if my life is somewhat disordered, then it is entirely possible that I am headed for difficulties, but even so we are never alone with this burden, we are to always remember God says to each of us look...even if you sin, in your struggle, your confusion or even your wilfulness, I will love you, I will not leave you, so do not be afraid!

As you read this is there anything in your life or the lives of those you love that you are struggling with, would like to change or simply do not know where to turn? Turn to Jesus, tell Jesus, ask Jesus what you would like for your life and listen carefully to that Word that comes to you, it may be that you will share with another you trust, you are not alone, do not be afraid.