

4TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, C

PERSECUTED YET LOVING

“This is the son of Joseph, surely? (Lk. 4: 22)

“Love is patient, kind and without envy ... keeps no score of offences ...

Love excuses all ... endures all” (1 Cor. 13: 4, 5, 7)

Setting the Stage for Conflicts: The Gospel of today (Lk. 4: 21-39) is a seamless flow from last Sunday’s Gospel. After Jesus had read from the Scroll of the prophet Isaiah and identified Himself as the One in whom the words of the prophet were fulfilled, He won the peoples’ approval as they were astonished by the gracious words He spoke. This was the response of the humble and lowly people – “The humble shall hear the Word of God and be glad” (Ps. 34: 2). But the reaction of the “wise” Pharisees was different. The Pharisees, who oversaw the rites and teachings in the synagogues felt threatened by the person and teachings of Jesus. For He taught them with authority (Lk. 4: 32), accompanied by power, signs, and miracles. This set the stage for confrontations that would lead to His being handed over and condemned to death on a Cross.

Like Jeremiah, Like Jesus: There are striking similarities between the First Reading (Jer. 1: 4-5. 17-19) and the Gospel – between Jeremiah and Jesus. Both were chosen from the womb (Jer. 1: 5; Lk. 1: 31); destined for persecution and rejection by their people (Jer. 1:18-19; Lk. 2: 34-35); likened to a sacrificial lamb (Jer. 11: 19-; Jn. 1: 29. 36); both were betrayed by those closest to them (Jer. 12: 6; Matt. 26: 47-50; Jn. 13: 18, 38, etc); both preached against the temple and predicted its destruction (Jer. 26: 2-6; Mk. 11: 15-19, 13: 1-2); condemned to death (Jer. 26: 8-9; Mk. 14: 57-58); tried by a kangaroo court (Jer. 37: 16-38; Jn. 18: 28-19: 16); and cast into a pit and raised from it again (Jer. 37: 16-21; Jn. 19: 40-20: 18). Both Jeremiah and Jesus fit into the image of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah; and Jeremiah can be said to be a prototype of the suffering prophet fulfilled in Jesus. The experiences of Jeremiah and Jesus confirm the truth that those who stand for the truth and justice must be prepared to suffer persecution. Their sufferings remind and challenge us as baptised Christians, who are prophets by that fact, that we must not be cowed

down nor intimidated to be silent in the face of falsehood and injustice. For silence in the face of these vices makes us perpetrators of same.

The Divine Presence, Not Immunity: Sometimes when the road is rough and the hills of life are too steep to climb, we are tempted to ask God query God's faithfulness and love. We almost always ask: "Why me?" "Where is God in all these?" The pandemic of the last two years has tested most of us and stretched us to such limits. The content of God's call of Jeremiah gives a broader picture or perspective to how we should be steadfast at such times. Before he was born, God had known Jeremiah and created him for a purpose; fortified him and sent him forth as His prophet among His people. But notice that God does not assure Jeremiah of a smooth sail. He has only promised him a safe landing. The journey will be turbulent as "They will fight against you" but you can be sure they "shall not overcome you" because "I am with you to deliver you." How often we forget that God's accompaniment on our journey through life does not interpret to a trouble-free trip. We must not forget that all through the life of Christ on earth, God the Father was with Him, pleased with His acts, yet Jesus had the most excruciating experiences. The lives of Jeremiah and Jesus call are presented here to encourage us in our resolve to persevere, and to strengthen our faith in the promise of God's abiding presence and our final triumph.

Our Response Is Love: How should we to respond to our persecutors who taunt us without reasons? It is easy to become bitter, hateful, retaliatory, self-righteous, and vengeful towards the persecutors. But St. Paul gives us the Christian code at such times. Love! Such love that is patient and kind; that is not quick-tempered; that does not brood over injuries; such love that bears all things and endures all things. In all his life, Jeremiah never hated his people nor cursed them. He sought no vengeance except to surrender to God, Who has the prerogative of vengeance (Deut. 32: 35; Rom. 12: 19). Christ, even on the Cross, prayed for the forgiveness of His persecutors (Lk. 23: 34). These are the timeless examples that we have been given to imitate. St. Pope John Paul the Great relived these outstanding examples when he forgave and visited Mehmet Agca, the Turkish assassin, who shot him twice in St. Peter's Square on 13 May 1981. This is what it means to be a prophet, a Christian and a missionary.

Dear friends, each of us is created by god in His image for a purpose set by Him. He has not promised us that we shall have no troubles, but He has assured us to be with us till the end of time. In the face of injustice, hatred, discrimination and persecution, our weapon must be love that forgives all and bears no desires for vengeance. This is the example that the lives of Jeremiah, Jesus and that of the apostle Paul has taught us. May God created and called us grant us the grace we need to persevere to the end.