

Twelfth Sunday of the Year A/2005

To be a believer or to be a disciple of Christ, and to bear witness to the word of God is not an easy business. It involves not only the joy of being chosen and given a mission, but also the risk of being misunderstood, criticized and even of being persecuted. The readings of this Sunday recall the fate of the prophets and of many of the missionaries. As a matter of fact, the light of God's word disturbs all those who prefer to live in darkness and the ignorance of God's repeated admonitions. They react inevitably by showing opposition and hostility. Thus, the persecution has often troubled the life of the prophets.

The first reading shows how Jeremiah has been under attack because of God's message he brought to his own people. What hurts the prophet most is that even his best friends are among the shouting crowd. He feels lost, barred from his own people and family, rejected by the community and all this because of his faithfulness to the word of God. In spite of all these obstacles, in spite of persecution, the prophet stands firm; he knows surely that God is always at his side. One day God will intervene and make the just cause triumph; God will never let him fall down. This is the message of hope that comes from this reading.

What do we learn from this text? It is difficult to be a prophet (understand this word in a broad sense as a particular duty given by God for the consolidation of his people. In this context, we are all prophets). But, how dangerous it may be to say the truth! How risky is it to be the first to raise his voice to protest against injustice! It is certainly easier to remain in the quiet and comfortable safety of one's house, or to avoid the difficulties by pretending not to see them, or to let others speak out. However, we all know that if today the world is better, if nations are enjoying greater freedom, if human rights are more respected, it is due to the sacrifice of some people who had the courage to stand up and speak. Think of Martin Luther King and his action in this country.

The prophet must have the courage to say the truth and to accomplish his mission without fear. It is the same message we receive from today's Gospel. Three times, Jesus says: "Do not be afraid". But, why should not the disciple be afraid? Those who announce and proclaim the Gospel are afraid, in the first place, that the violence brought against them by the enemies of Christ might make their mission fail. Christ reassures them. In spite of all the trials and difficulties, his message will spread and will transform the world. No enemy or evil force will be able to ruin God's plan. The work of his disciples will never be useless, even if they are put to death. The example of Christ himself becomes more eloquent here: his enemies were sure of having defeated him and having put an end to his message, but he arose to new life.

The second reason for fear arises from the prospect of being brutalized and even killed. Jesus' answer to this is that no violence can wrench from the disciples the life they have received from God. Yet there is something that we must fear: "The

one who can destroy both body and soul in hell". Who is this? Whoever and whatever can cause the disciples to lose the divine life present in them. I think that Jesus also means the fear of such a loss.

Persecution causes fear for a third reason. In fact, it does not touch only one person, but often involves the relatives who may be deprived of all the things they need for life. Here, Jesus comforts us by reminding us of the providence of the Father in heaven. Of course Jesus does not promise that nothing will happen to his disciples, nor is he saying that they will be spared or saved through some miraculous interventions. He simply promises that God will protect the good if they are faithful. In other words, God knows everything about us. He takes care of us more than the plants and the birds. We are worth more than an entire flock of sparrows.

By talking about providence here, it does not mean we have to drive when drunk under the pretext that God will protect us, or to run some risks by our bad behaviors with the hope that God will be at our side. To believe in God's providence in our life requires also the acceptance of our own responsibilities in any matter concerning our life.

Let me finish by saying that persecution is a kind of cloak that Christ's disciple will have to wear if he is firm in his belief. Maybe nowadays there is no danger for us of being killed, as there was in the beginning of the Church, but persecution is always possible. Christ and the Church will always have enemies. Persecuted is the Christian who is constantly teased by his colleagues because of his righteousness. Persecuted is the one who refuses to act and behave like everybody does in our present worldly culture. Persecuted is anybody who is rejected by his family and friends because of his faith in Jesus Christ. In persecutions, we need courage, perseverance and fidelity. It is only by doing so that Jesus can recognize us as his friends before his Father.

Moreover, there are many times we fear what others are saying or thinking about us. Very often we are afraid that people around us may be disappointed by our behaviors. Sometimes we are afraid of disappointing ourselves if we have not achieved our own expectations. But, do we care about what God expects from us? Are we even afraid of being separated from God forever because of our sinfulness? On this Father's day, let us ask God to teach us to revere and respect him as well as to be more concerned with fulfilling his Law than to let others intimidate us. Let us ask God to bless all our fathers who gave us life.



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