



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Preaching, teaching, sanctifying, governing

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19, Ps 70, 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13, Luke 4:21-30

‘If He had been Antichrist, Creeping Jesus, He’d have done anything to please us.’ (W. Blake –Everlasting Gospel)

There’s a lot to get in this morning so bear with me if I go back a bit behind the story. Most people, if they think of Jeremiah at all, dismiss him as a byword for what my grandmother used to call ‘a miseryguts’. His ministry seemed to be one long round of doom mongering. In truth Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet and got little joy from an half a century long ministry of warning the rulers and the people of their fate if they did not repent. He tried to resign on several occasions but the Lord wasn’t having any.

Jeremiah was His man and the task was to try to bring a disobedient nation to salvation and avoid the ruin otherwise in store.

Jeremiah had a good pedigree for the job. He was descended from the priestly line of Anathoth which descended from Abiathar. (I can almost hear the instant recognition). Abiathar was a loyal priest of King David’s time who made the mistake of backing the wrong horse in the scramble to succeed the great warrior king. Abiathar backed the eldest son, Adonijah.

The conniving Bathsheba managed to get her boy, Solomon, on the throne and most of the old loyalists were bloodily purged. So Abiathar, because he had been one of the bearers of the Ark, was lucky – demotion rather than death. But Jeremiah’s genetic credentials meant that he was not afraid to speak truth to power and he spent his life trying to get the People and the Princes to turn back to God. God told him that he was chosen before he was even formed in the womb. God promised to make him like a fortified city that will take on all comers.

In truth Jeremiah spent his life being attacked, disowned, imprisoned, even thrown down a well, exiled and finally murdered for his fidelity. If you ever want the Lord to give you a ministry then take my advice. Pray that it isn’t prophecy. God’s word is seldom popular.

Turning from the prophet priest of the Old Testament, we encounter Jesus. In the synagogue he has just been preaching and, as we heard, they initially liked what He said. ‘They were astonished by the gracious words that came from His lips’. ‘Isn’t Joseph’s lad doing well?’ they say, patronisingly. They are basking in the glow of what they think He has told them in the homily. Unfortunately they have missed the point. He is not praising them as such a holy lot that it’s no more than they deserve that the Messiah should come in their time. He is just about to tell them that, if past experience is anything to go by, the self-righteous in-crowd will be outflanked by the pagan foreigner who knows his need of God.

The response is instant and brutal. They want to kill Jesus. The preferred solution is to chuck Him off the nearest cliff. How dare he question our righteousness? So Jesus is not having any more luck than poor old

Jeremiah. We will witness the same vicious rejection later when the adulation of Palm Sunday turns into the 'Crucify Him' of Good Friday. What is going on here?

Well, both Jeremiah and Jesus are proclaiming God's Word. That often rankles with our pride, our self-conceit and absorption. We resent correction. We like priests and prophets who tell us we are good people and all is well. What St. Paul called 'ear ticklers'. But God's Word is not there to tickle our ears but to bring us to salvation. The task of the priest is the same as that of Jeremiah and Jesus and it is threefold. It is to represent Christ as prophet, priest and king.

The first task is that of preaching and teaching. It is the responsibility of the apostolic ministry to ensure the faithful know and understand the Word of God and its implication for our lives. A prophet is one who speaks the Word of God to his time. This may not be popular.

The second task is that of sanctifying the people of God. That is leading us to holiness. This is to be by example (the difficult one), by the sacramental life, by encouragement, by making sacrifices for the people. This is sheer hard work and the duty of every day's work and prayer.

The third task is that of governance. The leadership of the community is not an optional extra. There are different styles of leadership but the priest cannot abdicate that responsibility as has often become popular in our time. We serve a king who washed his subjects' feet. We serve a king who reigns from the tree of sacrifice. We serve a king whose judgement will be final but whose love is eternal. It is an awesome responsibility.

Neither Jeremiah, nor Jesus, nor any priest who will ever truly serve you will long for anything but your salvation. You will be written on his heart whenever he comes to the altar. But he cannot truly serve you unless he is doing these three things to the best of his ability, the Lord being his helper. Preaching & teaching, sanctifying, governing. Like Jeremiah, there may be times when he'd much rather be doing something else. But like Ezekiel he knows that he is responsible for his people. If he doesn't have the courage to tell them the truth then the Lord will hold him responsible for their blood. Like Jesus, there may be times when he can slip through the angry crowd but there will be many times when he is with Jesus on the Via Dolorosa, the Calvary road.

Remember, the heart of a prophet and a priest is always for the salvation of his people and for the coming kingdom of our loving Lord. So there may be times when we are tempted think a convenient well or a nearby clifftop might be the answer to any turbulent priest.

But before you grab us and drag us off, I ask only that you check out whether, however inadequately, we are trying to do those three tasks. Whether, however uncomfortable or inconvenient, we do it because we love Jesus and we love you.

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