



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year A-August 30th 2020

***Readings: Jeremiah 20: 7-9, Psalm 62, Romans 12: 1-2,
Matthew 16: 21-27***

I'm pushing an elephant up the stairs

I'm tossing out punchlines

That were never there

I'm breaking through

I'm bending spoons

I'm keeping flowers in full bloom

I'm looking for answers

From the great beyond

Those of you who were plumbd into the musical zeitgeist of the 80s and 90s will be quietly humming along with the lyrics of the American rock band REM. Others will be quietly assuming that the preacher has finally and demonstrably lost his marbles.

I quote Michael Stipes lyrics because they are, in some ways, a pithy summary of that vague hotch- potch of pseudo-mystical enquiry that largely replaced serious religion in much of what used to be Western Christendom. Impossibility, cleverness, chaos, psychic phenomena, lost souls.....

Mankind has always sought answers from the Great Beyond. Man is, by nature, a religious being. This should come as no surprise to a Christian who knows that Man is made in the image of God and is drawn thence. The problem is that, fallen as we are, the image not eradicated but blurred, we do not always like the answers we get. Most of us do not like answers that interfere with the way we have constructed our lives. It's uncomfortable. What we would like to know is the future - from the Lottery numbers to our ultimate fate. The Lottery numbers I can't help you with but the more significant question has a huge volume to hand. It's called the Bible. If we want to understand it we have the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

One of the ministries outlined in that great library of divine encounter and revelation is that of the Prophet. If you include the ministry of Moses, prophetic witness occupies half of the Old Testament. If you take the claim of Jesus to be Prophet, Priest and King seriously then that's the New Testament too.

Most people confuse prophecy with prediction. The great prophets are not souped up versions of Mystic Meg. Their task is to proclaim the Word of God in their generation. These proclamations have historical consequences, of course. But, if you listen to the prophets, they do not see Man as a victim of mechanistic Determinism. The hearer always has a choice. Turn back to God and be saved. Continue on the road away from God and ruin will embrace you.

Prophets are not popular. They are seldom, if ever, to be found in high office. Most of them spend their time in exile, in prison, on the run. When they are not being persecuted they are greeted with howls of derision. No-one in his right mind would volunteer for the job. But there doesn't seem to be any escape from this vocation – even Jonah on the ship to Tarshish has to turn back and get on with the job.

Today we meet in the wake of the Beheading of St John the Baptist whose crime was to tell the truth to those in power. Today we hear from

another great prophet, Jeremiah – a byword for misery. He doesn't want the job. He is derided, imprisoned and in constant danger of his life. What Jeremiah has to tell the people and their rulers is deeply contrary to the culture, hostile to the prevailing political consensus and, seemingly, at odds with common sense. He is, he tells God, a laughing stock. 'Everybody's butt' – as the unfortunate modern translation puts it. (It refers of course to a butt as a target not the American abbreviation for rear ends).

So desperate is the Prophet's plight that he pleads with God.

God has used his strength to overpower Jeremiah. He has bullied him.

God has seduced him. Strong language.

Jeremiah has tried very hard not to think about God or talk about him any more. He would love to be sacked. He doesn't want to go on warning his people about their impending ruin. He loves them. He wants their salvation. But, try as he might, he cannot stop being a prophet. It is like a fire in his bones and it keeps breaking out. He has to speak God's Word, whatever the pain whatever the cost. .

I thought of Jeremiah recently while watching an American Cop series. A seer, gifted with second sight, was being bullied and manipulated and doubted and derided. Finally in anguish she cried out:

'You think I want this? You think I want God in my head?'

Like most of us, I suspect, Jeremiah would love to be popular, well thought of. 'Here comes good old Jerry, the good time guy. Hail fellow. Well met.' Instead of 'Look out, it's that whinging, killjoy, collaborator religious nut-job'

The prophets have nowhere to go but God. As Ezekiel later records....

If I tell a man and he doesn't repent, his blood is on his own head.

If I don't tell him- it's on mine. (For 'man' read society, country, civilisation). But remember too, it's not just the 'high profiles'. Each one of us has a duty to proclaim God's Word, which is Christ, in our homes, our communities, our places of work and meeting. It's hard enough there,

we know. Imagine for those called to do that at a national or international level. It's a terrifying and dangerous and lonely ministry. Somebody has to do it. Be very, very grateful if it's not you and pray for those brave and oft conflicted messengers of God, in our time, on whom this desperate burden falls.

Even on a good day, it must feel just like 'pushing an elephant up the stairs'.