

22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year A

Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalms 63:2,3-4,5-6,8-9; Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 16:21-27
31 August 2008 at St Peter Chanel Catholic Church, Roswell, GA

by Deacon Mike Bickerstaff

How very providential that we have these particular readings and Gospel today. They bring us a timely message of incredible importance and relevance. It matters not how old or young you are... whether you are single or married... rich or poor. This message is sent to us... let us pray for wisdom.

In this year dedicated to St. Paul, it is appropriate to begin with his words:

“I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

Preceding this passage, Paul wrote movingly of the rejection by so many of the Jewish people of the Gospel of Christ. As with so many of the prophets sent by Almighty God to His people, Jesus and his message, were rejected by the people to whom it was first given and the consequences were disastrous for them. They were thinking, not like God does, but like men do.

Paul suffers in his heart for these people... he cares deeply for them as he also cares for those who embraced the Gospel. So like the prophets before him, he tells them the truth that they need to hear and not the poisonous message of the

popular culture that they might prefer.

What message do we open our minds and hearts to in our day? Do we listen to God as He speaks through His Church, or do we go our own way justifying our sin by our own distorted reasoning? St. Paul knows what we need to hear. “Do not conform yourselves to this age.”

He writes, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?”

My brothers and sisters, we are not our own creators. We do not know better than God how we are to live. We do not know better than God where our true happiness lies.

In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus tells his chosen apostles of the passion and death He must endure. He had just told them before that He will build His Church on the Rock of Peter. He is preparing them now for what must come.

Peter does not yet get it. He takes Jesus aside and tells him, “No! I will not permit it. It will never be so.” So Jesus says to Peter the very thing that Peter could never imagine Him saying. He calls Peter “Satan” and tells him, “Get thee behind me, you think not as God does, but as men do.” Jesus, out of love for

His friend, tells him what he must hear, not what he wants to hear.

Our Catholic faith and the culture of the times are opposed. Our Catholic faith teaches eternal truths that are not popular with the age. The times, they come and go, but the truth is forever unchanging.

Listen to what Jesus tells us:

- If you want to follow me, you must deny yourself and take up your cross.
- If you want to save your life (i.e., conform yourself to the age), you will lose it
- If you are willing to give your life to me, you will find it.
- What does it profit you to gain the world if you lose God?

The Psalmist tells us in today’s responsorial that the love of God is better than one’s life.

Peter did not yet get it, but he would soon. Do we get it?

In our first reading we see the great inner suffering of God’s prophet, Jeremiah. Let me tell you just a bit about Jeremiah and his mission. When God called Jeremiah he was a very young adult... He declared to him:

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I anointed you. I appointed a prophet to the Nations.”

God’s people had abandoned the right practice of the faith. They turned their backs to God and allowed themselves to be conformed to the age. So God sent Jeremiah to them, right in the heart of Jerusalem to call them back.

Jeremiah, reluctantly accepted this call... he obeyed. God said to him, “Be not afraid, I go before you always.” So Jeremiah went, following God. But God’s people would not listen. The people of Judah found themselves in the middle of an armed struggle between the two great powers of the day, 600 years before the time of Christ. Jeremiah warned them that this was more than a mere historical condition. It was the moral consequence of their rejection of God.

And they hated Jeremiah for what he said. And when they were carried off into the Babylonian Exile and Jerusalem lay in total waste, they eventually stoned Jeremiah to death, just like others would one day call for the crucifixion of Jesus. And just as Jerusalem was destroyed in Jeremiah’s time, Jerusalem would once again be destroyed by an army after Jesus is rejected.

Don’t worry about Jeremiah, in his martyrdom, he has found new life in Christ whom he prefigured. Worry instead for all who conform themselves to the spirit of the age.

Being conformed to the age brings death and destruction. History records it, Jesus foretold it and the Church continues His

prophetic and redemptive mission by preaching it.

In our day, God has sent us prophets, you can see their likeness in that beautiful stained glass window at the front of the left wall of the nave... right over there. Pope John Paul the Great and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. By their prophet words and actions, they proclaimed the Culture of Life to those who live in the midst of a culture of death.

Mother Teresa proclaimed to America, “Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching its people to love, but to use any violence to get what it wants.” She said, “It is a poverty to decide that a child must die so that you might live as you wish.”

John Paul the Great decried the “slaughter of innocent” unborn on a worldwide scale and gave a clarion call to our bishops to proclaim a “Gospel of Life.”

This is the prophetic message of God given to us through His Church. It is an unchanging truth, yet the culture of our age is opposed to it. Some would try to deceive you. They would say that the Church has not always taught this truth. That in the past, there was great disagreement about abortion. In this way these false prophets would try to justify their sin and mislead you.

DO NOT BE DECEIVED.

DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THE AGE.

DO NOT THINK AS MEN DO. THINK AS GOD DOES.

Abortion is always the taking of an innocent life and gravely sinful.

(To the Younger People)

Now I want to speak specifically to those of you here who are teens and young adults. I know how difficult it is for you to be Catholics in this culture. Some might think me too old and far removed from what you face to understand the pressures you face. But that is not so.

It is not long ago that I sat where you sit today. I came of age during the sexual and drug revolution.

I know the pressures you face and the struggles you endure and the uncertainties you feel. And I have personally seen the path of destruction that is the consequence of unwise and unholy choices.

And that is why I pray for you each day... always.

There may be times when you may think that no one understands you... but God does.

There may be times that you think that no one loves you... but God does.

There may be times when you feel close to despair and cannot see the way to the future... but God sees...

Before He formed you in the womb, He knew you... Before you were born, He anointed you...

...And He says to you, do not despair... be not afraid... do not conform yourself to the spirit of this age... I am your God... I love you... and I go before you always.

May God Bless You.