

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel-St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**June 21, 2020, Streaming Mass**  
**12th Sunday of Year A    Jeremiah 20:10-13**

"Terror on every side! Denounce! Let us denounce him." Jeremiah, a prophet, is under attack; people whom he had thought he could rely on had turned against him. "All those who were my friends are on the watch for any misstep of mine." Obviously something Jeremiah has said has upset people; he has offended them, so that now they want to take vengeance upon him; they want to get rid of him." But we don't find Jeremiah offensive; in fact, we read Jeremiah as calmly as if we were reading Jane Austen.

How do we view the prophets of ancient Israel; how do we view the prophet Jesus? What was the unique role that the prophet played then, and how willing, how receptive are we to hear prophets speak today, a message that would challenge us to reevaluate some of the thorny, troublesome, social issues we have to deal with. How do we look at those issues, not just from a perspective of self-interest and self-preservation, but from a perspective that is shaped by God's word, by God revealing over time through those individuals, those prophets, what is the right way, what is the just way, to repair the world, to build a society wherein everyone gets their due?

So, what was the unique contribution of the prophet of ancient Israel; what made them so special? And what is it that we can learn from them today? To put it very simply, they gave people the ability to remember, and they gave them a capacity for hope. They gave them a sense of the past and of the future; they gave them a sense of history. Today we take that more or less for granted, but then it was something special. Most of their pagan neighbors had a kind of cyclic view of history. The pagan gods were seen as embodying and reflecting aspects of nature. As a consequence, the pagans saw their lives as stuck in the endless repetition of the seasons. There was no real past nor any real future; just always more and more of the same. What that did was to legitimize the status quo. The people at the top of the social hierarchy were seen as supposed to be at the top, and the people at the bottom were seen as supposed to be at the bottom. To their minds, that was the way things had always been; that is how they would always be.

The God of the Hebrews was seen as a God who was not bound by the limitations of space and time. More importantly, theirs was a God who made of them, while they were still slaves in Egypt, a distinctive people, a people with a mission, with a destiny—to create a society wherein not just the rulers were viewed as made in the

image of God, but one wherein all people were valued as having been made in God's image. Every individual was seen as having a unique value and worth. That was something totally new and different in the ancient world; that was a revelation. Because God gave the Jews a sense of history, they would always have to remember where they had come from, slavery in Egypt, and the hope of what they might be—a people of whom, as Deuteronomy says, there would be no poor among them, because they all would live with the dignity that was given them by God.

The prophets were called by God to remind their fellow Hebrews again and again of their past and future. When the Hebrews began to resemble their pagan neighbors, with their exploitation of the poor, with the waging of wars of conquest, with their pride in their own self-sufficiency, the prophets challenged the powerful of their day to get back on track—essentially to remember where they come from, and what they were called to be. The prophets rebuked them for their worship of false gods, not just because they were going into a different temple to pray, but because the worship of the false god, a god who was but a reflection of themselves, provided them with a validation and justification for the unjust practices that the God of Israel would never tolerate. The God of the Hebrews provided the path of justice and freedom; worship of the pagan gods would only lead to enslavement.

The challenge for us today is to what degree do we recognize the prophetic role as an essential part of our religious tradition as Roman Catholics? Jesus placed himself squarely within the context of that prophetic tradition. When He went to the Temple courtyard and turned over the tables of the money-changers, He was performing a dramatic gesture in the prophetic style to illustrate how corrupt had become the kind of worship going on in the Temple. And that prophetic gesture was what precipitated His death.

There is always the temptation to dismiss what the prophet has to say, because often we don't want to listen to what he says; we don't want to have to change our ways and, worst of all, we don't want to have to examine our own involvement and complicity with the very patterns of behavior that are being held up for examination and critique. There is always a market for a religion that goes down easy, that makes us feel good about ourselves, that confirms and validates all our social, political preferences, our biases and prejudices, that challenges us to grow only in a rather narrow sphere of our lives (the personal, the interpersonal), but leaves unexamined and unreformed whole areas of our social, political and economic lives. There is certainly a market for the form, as we see in the growth of some of the mega-churches throughout our nation today, where God is indeed worshiped, but where only a very “easy-listening” brand of Christianity is preached.

If Jeremiah were alive today, if Jesus were physically present in our streets, no doubt they would be challenging us to confront the racism that is built into the structures of our society. Living these past three months through the pandemic should have made us painfully aware that black and brown people have suffered disproportionately the effects of the coronavirus, not because they are genetically predisposed to its infection, but because they are forced to live with limited access to health care, poor nutrition, substandard housing, holding the low-paying jobs that were seen as "essential" to the running of our society, and not having to have the luxury of being able to work at home. The protests in our streets throughout the nation have called to mind the fact that black people are again disproportionately the victims of excessive police force. Racism has been called the "original sin" of our nation, and so indeed it is. It is up to those of us who share the prophetic tradition to be as Isaiah says, "repairers of the breach," to be those who try to reconstruct our nation in the way it should be, living up to our highest ideals.

When we were baptized one of the prayers the priest said after pouring the water on our head was, "As Christ as anointed priest, prophet and king, so may you live following His example." We were baptized in the prophetic tradition of Jesus and of Jeremiah. May we live out that tradition, remembering where we have come from, where we should be headed, and how we should act in the meanwhile.