

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

One of the things that happened pretty regularly to me as a kid growing up was, when asking permission to do something or go somewhere, one of my parents would respond with “We’ll see.”

Usually that meant that the answer was going to be “no,” as mom or dad thought through the rationale for refusing permission, but there were times when the final answer, especially with dad, was “Well, I guess so.” Good enough!

There was always at least a faint glimmer of hope with “We’ll see,” something you could cling to.

There are a lot of occasions in our life when a decision is deferred—for the sake of gathering more information or allowing a situation to become clearer. We can even build that into our decision-making process. “When do you need to know by?” might be an initial response while we work out the details.

Jesus is operating in a different context in today’s Gospel. He recognizes that his very presence and the radical quality of his message will force people to take sides, to make a decision for or against him. There’s no way around it. No straddling the fence.

Jeremiah found himself in a similar position. While Jerusalem was under siege and the order of the day was “all hands on deck!” Jeremiah continued to call the people to conversion.

Rather than face their common foe, the Babylonians, Jeremiah was proclaiming the message, “The common foe is us! We are the reason for this calamity. The only proper response is to return to the Lord.”

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Jeremiah's message was not well received, to say the least. And it can happen that, when we take to heart the message of Jesus in a new way, people can take sides against us.

“Too radical!” “Too churchy!” Too holier than thou.” Or maybe just “That will never work.”

Actually, we can be on either side of the equation, depending on our circumstances. Will our vested interests be compromised? Are we counting the costs and finding them to be too high? Then it's more likely that we'll find a reason not to get on board.

What seems to be beyond question, though, given the imagery that Jesus chooses to use, is that he is bringing about a decision point in the lives of all of us. In fact, that decision point is less about a point in time than it is about our fundamental stance to the grace of God and the call of the Gospel.

It's not enough to submit to the sacrament of confirmation, for example, when we commit ourselves to a mature Christianity. Even after that public and solemn commitment we will be confronted with occasions which contain within themselves the opportunity to put that adult faith to work, to proclaim our allegiance to Christ and his kingdom, or not.

Since we live in a secular culture where no official record is being kept of whether we are being true to our promises or not, we can be lulled into believing that, if we need to, we can fudge on the matter and take an easier path—until someone who has caught fire for the Gospel calls us out and the hidden divisions become apparent.

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As I said, there's no escaping the razor's edge. Jesus was the source of division among his contemporaries. He didn't set out to be that way. It simply came with the territory of being so in tune with the will of his Father. Jeremiah was similarly single-minded in how he carried out his prophetic ministry.

So are all who allow the Spirit of Jesus to rule in their hearts today. It's not because of any desire to foment controversy, it's simply the result of a desire to serve the truth.

What will we do in the face of that? What side will we take? "We'll see" only works for so long. Eventually, a decision will have to be made and our true allegiance made clear.