



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, June 21, 2020
The Third Sunday After Pentecost

Choral Mattins and Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Jeremiah 20:7-13 and Matthew 10:24-39
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“The burning word of the prophets.”

When I was at college, I had a friend who was the eternal pessimist. He always saw the glass as ‘half-empty’ rather than ‘half-full’ and if someone had an idea, you could guarantee that he would be the one to think of what might be wrong with it! I guess that’s why his nickname was Jeremiah! Poor Jeremiah; the prophecy we heard today hardly makes encouraging reading! But Jeremiah had reason to feel miserable, he was treated appallingly by the authorities in Jerusalem, even being thrown into an empty well to sit in the mud. His message was one of impending doom – he challenged those in authority because he could see what was going to happen to Jerusalem and the remnant of Israel, but they would not listen.

Jeremiah understood that he had to be true to his calling and vocation and he could not stay silent: “*there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones,*” he said. His relationship with God was intimate and deep. Do you remember how God spoke to him when he first called him? “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*” (Jeremiah 1:4).

Hundreds of years later, God again called his people to himself only, this time, it was God who entered into the womb himself – the womb of Mary – when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Our Gospel reading today is set in the context of the first great missionary journey of the disciples. Jesus prepared them to be sent out – to become Apostles – to tell people the Good News, that is *the Gospel*, that the Kingdom of God was close at hand. We eavesdrop on his instructions but it is hardly a ‘pep’ talk in the way that a coach would try and inspire his or her athletic team. Like Jeremiah, Jesus also knew that his news would not be received as welcome by many.

Earlier in this chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus told the disciples that they would travel light and earn no reward: “*You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.*” (Matthew 10:8b-10). Jesus then told them that they were being sent out like ‘*sheep in the midst of wolves.*’ He warned them that they would be arrested, flogged, persecuted. His description is shocking, “*Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name.*” (Matthew 10:21-22).

At this stage, I cannot imagine that the disciples were feeling very confident about their missionary skills! It seems odd that proclaiming good news would result in such rejection. (Then again, perhaps they had just had a bible study on Jeremiah!).

But Jesus has something really important to say just before he sends them out. And he says it three times. **Do not be afraid.** Just as we heard in our prophecy from Jeremiah, when people are against *us* and mock the message of the Gospel

like those first disciples we, too, can hear Jesus telling us not to fear: Jesus said, **“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered... Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; ... even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”**

If you have ever had to make a speech, or give a testimony; perhaps act as a witness in a court of law, or perform on the stage; give a recital; make the opening incision of a delicate surgical procedure; speak at a funeral of a loved one; you will know all too well how your body physically reacts before the event. If you have tried an extreme sport; jumped out of a plane, or even just strapped yourself into a roller-coaster, then you will recognize the symptoms: The raised heartbeat; the dry mouth; feeling hot, even sweaty; perhaps a tremor that affects all of you; it is as if the body is reacting and preparing for something – something fearful and not just difficult.

“Do not fear”, said Jesus. Note that he did not tell the disciples to ignore the physical and mental reality of what they are about to do, in fact, Jesus describes it in terrifying detail. But he also said to them, ‘do not fear.’

Speaking to the Commonwealth of Nations just after the last Olympic Games, Queen Elizabeth II spoke about the way athletes prepare for an event and how they, quite literally, take a deep breath before they begin. She commented on how the word *inspiration* comes from that very action of taking in of breath and how inspiration can lead to *aspiration* for others – encouraging them to follow their example.

Jesus ended his instruction to his disciples by giving them an aspiration that would only come through inspiration – through the indwelling of the breath of the Holy Spirit – and by the example that their Master would himself set. What was it?

Jesus invited his disciples to take up their cross.

Now this is extraordinary! In the Roman Empire, crucifixion was reserved for slaves, pirates, and enemies of the state. Even women and children were not exempt if they fell in those categories. It was for the lowest in Roman society. By choosing such a symbol to end his instruction for the missionary journey, Jesus revealed the dissonance between human pride and the values of the Kingdom of God. He who would suffer, himself, upon a cross, demanded nothing less of his disciples; to make the choice - to choose *him*. To let his inspiration be their aspiration just as on the day of his Resurrection, he appeared to them and *breathed on them* and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” And we pray that, like them, it may affect *our* choices; help us to choose Jesus again, and not to be silent when we, too, have the same burning within our bones as Jeremiah described.

My friends, sometimes, what the Church has to say in our society does not seem like good news to it – it is often counter-cultural and, certainly, is the cause of confrontation, ridicule, of people walking away, and sometimes it is the cause of persecution, especially when it concerns issues of morals, ethics, or social justice. But Jesus prepared us for that and, like Jeremiah, and like those first disciples, and like Jesus himself, we cannot stay silent for we must take up our cross and follow him.

Some words of Saint Oscar Romero:

“It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world: a very spiritualized word, a word without any commitment to history, a word that can sound in any part of the world because it belongs to no part of the world. A word like that creates no problems, starts no conflicts.

What starts conflicts and persecutions, what marks the genuine Church, is the word that, burning like the word of the prophets, proclaims and accuses: proclaims to the people God’s wonders to be believed and venerated, and accuses of sin those who oppose God’s reign, so that they may tear that sin out of their hearts, out of their societies, out of their laws—out of the structures that oppress, that imprison, that violate the rights of God and of humanity. This is the hard service of the word.

But God’s Spirit goes with the prophet, with the preacher, for he is Christ, who keeps on proclaiming his reign to the people of all times.” (Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, page 18)