

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 25, 2017, Year A
Father Mike Holloran

Our Lectionary usually pairs up the Old Testament reading and the Gospel because of some common theme. Today, the theme seems to be fear. But how different they sound.

Jeremiah hears the whisperings of many, “Terror on every side! Denounce. Let us denounce him!”

Matthew quotes Jesus telling his disciples “Fear no one.”

Are these readings paired up because they have such different messages about fear? “Terror on every side”, “Fear no one”. That runs the gamut, from one extreme to the other. Let's dig into this a little and see what's going on.

Jeremiah, one of the best known of Old Testament prophets, lived in the 7th century BC, at a time when the little Kingdom of Judah was doing pretty well, but there were two simmering threats to their peace and prosperity – idolatry, and power politics. And these two threats were linked.

Judah was a small kingdom surrounded by pagan neighbors. The Jews could hardly help but engage in commerce with those neighbors, the source of their prosperity; but friendly commercial relations had a way of leading to marriage relations, which had a way of mixing pagan ways into the worship of Yahweh. Some even sacrificed their children to Baal, the chief Canaanite deity. How could the people who had known the one true God sink so low? Well, you know, you go along to get along. No sense offending anybody, like your trading partner, or your wife, or any gods they might worship. Cover all your bases, stay on top of the game, and you can keep ahead of disaster.

Disaster was usually one misstep away, because beyond Judah's immediate neighbors were the big league powers, the aspiring empires of Egypt, to the southwest, and Babylon, to the northeast. But if you're clever enough you can avoid disaster, even prosper from a dangerous situation by playing your competitors against each other.

At the time of Jeremiah, Babylon posed the greater threat of gobbling up the neighborhood, so the Judean elites were telling their king to ally with Egypt and refuse tribute to Babylon. Jeremiah said, “Don't do it! It will bring disaster! Better to reform our lives, return to Yahweh, and submit to Babylonian control. They are distant. All they want is taxes. We can survive if we stop relying on our own cleverness at playing the game.”

Disaster was Jeremiah's message, almost his middle name. Even today, in the English language, a warning with lament over disaster is called a “jeremiad”. But preaching jeremiads will not make you popular, and Jeremiah was not. Since the king listened to him sometimes, there were plots to trap him in his speech and denounce him.

On one occasion, the chief of the temple police, someone named Pashhur, arrested Jeremiah for prophesying destruction. In rebuke, Jeremiah told him, “Instead of Pashhur, the Lord will name you 'Terror on every side'”; meaning that Pashhur would live to see the Babylonians devastate Jerusalem. (Jer. 20:1-6)

This got around, and people started mocking Jeremiah with his own words. “Ha! Here he comes, 'Terror on every side'. He's the terror with his crazy talk. Denounce him to the king!”

But Pashhur and the others who mocked Jeremiah lived to see it as the Babylonians broke through the walls and put the city to the sword.

Jesus too lived at a time of grave danger for his people. Under Roman occupation the Jews were splintering among themselves, and getting more and more hateful, each faction toward the others. The establishment Sadducees were in bed with the Romans and enriching themselves from the temple treasury. The Pharisees were so focused on ritual purity that they scorned everyone else. The disadvantaged masses were being pressed down into poverty by a system rigged against them. The Zealots were bent on violence and dreamed that once the revolution began God and His messiah would deliver them from their oppressors like the Maccabees of old.

Jesus could see where all this was heading. He knew that the only remedy was personal repentance and factional reconciliation. God alone could heal the Kingdom of Judah, so he reached out to Sadducees, to Pharisees, to Zealots, to the masses, trying to turn them back to God before it was too late. But he and his message were rejected, and then it was too late.

As Jesus approached the city on Palm Sunday he wept over it, saying--

“Jerusalem! Jerusalem! If this day you only knew what makes for peace. The days are coming upon you when your enemies will smash you to the ground and your children within you because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.” (Lk. 19:41-44)

But Jesus did not come primarily to save ancient Jerusalem from self-destruction, as much as he would have liked to spare his own people. God had chosen Israel for the sake of mankind. Ultimately, God's people is the whole human race. He wants to spare us all from self-destruction. That is why he sent his disciples into the world with his message of life-saving repentance. It is urgent. His messengers, like Jeremiah, are mocked and persecuted, but fear not! If you serve God, He will take care of you. If you fear no one, God will use you to save them. The gospel shows mankind what makes for peace. Don't be intimidated by those who are trying to silence it.

The Almighty has not made a covenant with the United States, as He did with ancient Israel, and for which he will discipline our failures. But human nature being what it is, worldly success has a way of breeding arrogance, and arrogance makes one reckless, and the reckless bring disaster on themselves.

If Jeremiah were sent to us today, what would he have to say? It would not be easy listening. Anybody who's been paying attention could preach their own jeremiad to the United States of America. They might differ in the sins they denounce and the corruptions they condemn, but every genuine jeremiad would have the same message – that if we do not recognize the times, if we reject what makes for peace, if we think that we can stay ahead of disaster indefinitely by a clever playing of the game, serve as the world's policeman while our own house slides into disorder, if we do not humble ourselves with prayer and penance under God's healing hand, then we will merit a new name, and live to see it: “terror on every side”.

But the Almighty wants to spare us, and it is not, as yet, too late.