

4th Sunday of the Year C 2010

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you.

These words from the prophet Jeremiah are full of meaning and hope for Christians living in a world that has a vital need for the prophetic voice that speaks the truth that comes from God. Of course, the world in which Jeremiah lived also had need of truth, though we might readily agree that the message of Jeremiah was clearly aimed more at the conversion of his own nation of Israel than the conversion of the world. The world, in a sense, could be expected to be in rebellion against God since it was not blessed with the Law and the Covenant God had struck with Israel as his chosen people. But Jeremiah lived in a time in which God's beloved people were in great rebellion and were seriously unfaithful to the law and God's covenant and were about to be sent into exile as a punishment. They needed fearless prophets to call them to conversion and Jeremiah was to be one of them, although his mission would ultimately be rejected and would end in failure and the Babylonian Exile for Israel.

But understanding the primacy of his mission to Israel, it is very interesting that God says to him: "a prophet *to the nations* I appointed you." God's truth and conversion to the truth can never be intended for only some people, or for just one special nation. Truth is a necessity for all mankind, and God's revealed truth is essential for every person's human dignity. Only God's revealed truth can enlighten man as to what his true final destiny, what his final perfection and final happiness really

are; and only God's revealed truth and free gifts can enable man to reach that final end. In short, God has revealed to man that he was made for God, that is, to have a profound and unending communion of life and love in God. That is our only possible happiness in the full sense, and only if we believe this and humbly seek God's truth and God's grace can we have any hope of attaining the purpose for which we were created.

And yet how difficult it is to preach successfully this good news that we are made for God and an unending happiness in God, but that we will attain that greatest good only if we accept God's laws and humbly seek God's grace to make our way to Him in Heaven. The reason prophets are rejected is always, in one way or another, due to a rejection of the *means* to that glorious end, not the end itself. Nobody with the slightest faith will reject the good news of the end, that God made us for eternal happiness in God. It's the *means* to the end that sinful man rejects, and has rejected from the first sin, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's law in Paradise and asserted their own wills as the law for them. Man wants to be his own law, and the idea that he has to follow the law of someone outside himself – including God - in matters of morality or has to depend upon someone outside of himself – including God – for gifts of grace to stay on the straight and narrow is seen as degrading, demeaning, slavery.

Sin is rebellion against dependence on God for truth or grace, and man has been filled with this pride since the rebellion in Paradise. Conversion is very painful because it means humbling oneself, destroying pride and replacing it with submission to God. Prophets are for that reason never popular in their own milieu. Jeremiah was

persecuted terribly when he tried to convert Israel and save it from the suffering of the exile which would reduce them to political slavery for 70 years.

Jesus, as we see in today's Gospel, would Himself be rejected even by his own village, from the very beginning of his ministry, and he would warn his life-long neighbors, "*Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.* But they would not listen and would try to kill him by throwing him off a cliff. The saddest implications of that rejection are in the final line: *But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went away.* Jesus went away, and there is no record he ever again returned to preach the saving Gospel in Nazareth.

Jesus' mission was to teach Israel the truth, the truth about God's love for all men, God's Fatherhood, His divine Sonship, the universal call to be God's true adopted children, His was the truth that would set them free from sin, and His was the grace without which no one can truly be free. He came to offer them Paradise and the *means* to get there, that is the truth and the grace to reach Eternal Life. But in the end, His own people and the pagan Romans would treat him worse than Jeremiah. They would murder him on a cross.

However, the Truth itself cannot be killed, and Jesus, who is the Truth, rose from the dead, and His good news remains the central message of the Church in all ages. But the Church, like her divine Lord and Master, will find that its prophetic message, His good news of salvation, will also bring persecution, and often martyrdom. Men today, as always, will refuse to be told how God wills that they are to live.

They reject the messenger because they reject the message, because that message includes the moral law, and they will have no moral law except themselves and their own ideas about good and evil. They would gladly accept the idea that God wills their eternal happiness, so long as God does not interfere with their life on earth by telling them how to live here so as to get to Heaven.

It's interesting, in this regard, that huge numbers of Americans, over 80% I think, report that they believe in some sort of God and some sort of eternal happiness after death. However, much fewer believe in a place of eternal punishment, that the Scripture calls Hell, and for many of those who do believe in its existence, few seem to think many people will end up there. Nor do many of these believers in heaven and hell also believe they must live in any definite way in order to get to Heaven, including obeying the commandments set out in Scripture. In many contemporary minds, there is a conviction that only a few truly evil men actually end up in Hell, perhaps Hitler, or the person who gravely harmed them or harmed someone they deeply love. The rest of us will all get to Heaven without paying much attention to God or to God's commandments, or to religious practices, like prayer, or to anything that seems too religious.

The Church, at least the Catholic Church, teaches a very definite and absolute moral law, which includes many moral norms that the general population does not accept. Thus, the Church cannot expect to be popular in such a relativistic culture, and yet the Church must continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus and God's salvation for man,

including the moral law and the necessity of God's grace for human freedom and salvation. The Church has been a particularly lonesome prophetic voice in our day in warning the nations, not just Catholics, that the rebellion against God's laws is leading to cultural decay and things worse than the exile suffered by the Israelites in the time of Jeremiah.

Perhaps nothing has been more prophetic in this sense, and has caused the Church to suffer more rejection, than her constancy in teaching that sins like abortion and contraception threaten man's dignity and even his very existence. Yet, how sad that the nations of Europe did not accept this teaching of the Church 40 years ago. Today there is not a single nation in Europe, East or West, that has a birth rate even at a replacement level; most are perilously below that level. According to the United Nations and other population experts, before this century is out, assuming that nothing changes in the contraceptive mentality that leads to abortion, all European nations will experience a population decline that can only be described as catastrophic for the economic and social well-being, and perhaps even for the very survival of these nations and their cultures as they have existed for 2000 years.

The Church today has to be the prophet of life, the defender of the lives of the unborn and the weak, the aged, the handicapped. We will not carry out this mission without suffering for it. But love of God and neighbor will not allow us to falter because we suffer.

As St. Paul says, love "*does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.*" We must rejoice in the truth that every human life is precious because every human person is made for God. We must

proclaim that truth in season and out of season, and depend for our success on God, who, promised us through Jeremiah; *Be not crushed on their account, as though I would leave you crushed before them; for it is I this day who have made you a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass, against the whole land.*” Life is our message, a message badly needed by our world and our nation, and God is our strength. May Jesus Christ, be praised. Amen