

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C



FIRST READING
Jeremiah 1:4–5, 17–19

PSALM
Psalm 71:1–6, 15, 17

SECOND READING
1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13

GOSPEL
Luke 4:21–30

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PRAYER

Psalm 71:1–6, 15, 17

In you, O LORD, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
In your righteousness
deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.
Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
Rescue me, O my God,
from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.
For you, O LORD, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.
Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me
from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.
My mouth will tell
of your righteous acts,
of your deeds of salvation
all day long,
though their number
is past my knowledge.
O God,
from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim
your wondrous deeds.

READING THE WORD

First Reading

Jeremiah 1:4–5, 17–19

Now the word of the Lord came to
me saying,
“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.”

But you, gird up your loins; stand
up and tell them everything that I
command you. Do not break down
before them, or I will break you be-
fore them. And I for my part have
made you today a fortified city,
an iron pillar, and a bronze wall,
against the whole land—against
the kings of Judah, its princes, its
priests, and the people of the land.
They will fight against you; but they
shall not prevail against you, for I
am with you, says the Lord, to de-
liver you.

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13

Strive for the greater gifts. And I will
show you a still more excellent way.
If I speak in the tongues of mortals
and of angels, but do not have love, I
am a noisy gong or a clanging cym-
bal. And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and
all knowledge, and if I have all faith,
so as to remove mountains, but do
not have love, I am nothing. If I give
away all my possessions, and if I
hand over my body so that I may
boast, but do not have love, I gain
nothing.
Love is patient; love is kind; love is
not envious or boastful or arrogant
or rude. It does not insist on its own
way; it is not irritable or resentful; it
does not rejoice in wrongdoing,

but rejoices in the truth. It bears all
things, believes all things, hopes all
things, endures all things.
Love never ends. But as for proph-
ecies, they will come to an end; as
for tongues, they will cease; as for
knowledge, it will come to an end.
For we know only in part, and we
prophesy only in part; but when
the complete comes, the partial will
come to an end. When I was a child,
I spoke like a child, I thought like a
child, I reasoned like a child; when
I became an adult, I put an end to
childish ways. For now we see in a
mirror, dimly, but then we will see
face to face. Now I know only in
part; then I will know fully, even as
I have been fully known. And now
faith, hope, and love abide, these
three; and the greatest of these is
love.

Gospel

Luke 4:21–30

Jesus began to say to the people of
Nazareth, “Today this scripture has
been fulfilled in your hearing.” All
spoke well of him and were amazed
at the gracious words that came
from his mouth. They said, “Is not
this Joseph's son?”
He said to them, “Doubtless you
will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doc-
tor, cure yourself!’ And you will say,
‘Do here also in your hometown the
things that we have heard you did
at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Tru-
ly I tell you, no prophet is accepted
in the prophet's hometown. But the

truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

HEARING THE WORD

“Going against the Grain”

Last Sunday we learnt that Ezra, Paul, and Jesus all worked to liberate their people from ignorance. Such a work always requires great strength and determination because it involves “going against the grain”, which means standing against the opinions, expectations and actions of many. Today’s liturgy focuses on this theme.

The first reading contains the vocation story of the prophet Jeremiah. This tragic prophet was an eyewitness to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and to the beginning of the Babylonian exile. As a young man, Jeremiah heard God’s voice revealing that he was consecrated for a prophetic mission, even before his birth. The word “consecrate” implies a divine appointment for a very special task, which God subsequently defined. Jeremiah would be sent to his own nation, particularly to its leaders, to “tell them everything”. We know from his book, that the message

he was to carry would contain a bitter denunciation of the various sins and betrayals of God by the Israelites. He would speak against the king, nobles and priests revealing their infidelities and violations of the covenant. Finally, he would declare that Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed. Not surprisingly, Jeremiah’s message made him public enemy number one. He was hounded, ridiculed, persecuted, imprisoned and almost executed on several occasions. Despite this misery, Jeremiah remained committed to his mission throughout his life. Relying on God’s help, Jeremiah went “against the grain”, challenging the false assumptions and erroneous religious beliefs of the leaders and people, who lived in the illusion of being faithful and pious.

The second reading completes the presentation of Paul’s struggles with the Corinthians regarding the use of charismatic gifts. Based on his teaching presented over the two previous Sundays, Paul delivers a final challenge to the Corinthian’s misguided views and practices. He identifies God’s single and supreme gift, which the members of the Corinthian community should pursue above all others - love. He begins by emphasizing that all other gifts: tongues, prophecy, understanding, knowledge, faith, and even self-sacrifice, mean nothing if they do not originate in love. Services and ministries can be exercised for the wrong reasons, for example to gain popularity or for profit. Therefore, love is necessary to ensure the charismatic gifts are properly employed.

But what is love? For Paul, love (“agape” in Greek) is a way of living and acting in a manner beneficial to a fellow community member. He provides a descriptive definition of love listing fifteen attitudes and actions which describe love. Love includes patience, kindness, pursuit of truth, perseverance, faith, hope, and endurance. Adversely, love excludes envy, boastfulness, arrogance, rudeness, self-interest, anger, resentment and wrong doing. A person who loves is an amiable, constant, faithful and fruitful community member who creates unity and makes the group grow. A person without love is self-centred and contentious, one who disrupts and destroys the community bonds.

Paul emphasizes that this kind of love is permanent because it originates from God himself. His list of qualities of love describes how God deals with humanity. Thus, the one who knows and understands God acts in God-like way through this very practical love. The faithful will reach the fulness of this love only after they see God “face to face” and become perfect. Until that time, they ought to live love out in the community, accompanied by hope and faith.

This message probably came as a shock to many Corinthians. They were interested in competition, self-glorification, and pursuit of the highest positions in the community, thinking it normal and acceptable. Paul dramatically challenges their mindset, and his message would have been very unpopular. We know from 2 Corinthians that his

Christians eventually disowned him as their leader, and even ejected him from their community when he came for a visit. Paul persisted and courageously stood by his teaching against his rebellious community. He was able to do so on the foundation of his firm and clear convictions regarding what the Christian community was all about. These convictions were grounded in Paul's personal experience of Jesus, and also in the development he has undergone as a Christian and an apostle. In today's reading he refers to this growth, writing about his transformation from a child into an adult. Paul matured as a Christian and no challenge could have made him change his ways or dilute his teaching. Like Jeremiah, "he went against the grain", because he was a mature and confident apostle, firmly set in his convictions.

Today's Gospel narrates the second part of Jesus' visit to Nazareth. When he read from the prophet Isaiah and declared that he came to fulfil those words as a liberator and revealer, his townspeople praised him and rejoiced. One of their own was a great prophet! All that changed dramatically when Jesus declared that his prophetic mission will include going to the Gentiles. Like other great prophets, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus intended to bring God's salvation to the non-Jews also. This statement shocked the people of Nazareth. How could God's Messiah offer salvation to the non-Jews? They expected him to be their Messiah, with liberation and healing benefiting them, and them alone. Going to the Gentiles sounded like a betrayal and blasphemy. Since Jesus went against their expecta-

tions he would be rejected, just as many prophets before him, including Jeremiah. Shockingly, the people of his town who had just praised him a moment ago, now turned against him in a violent rage, attempting to kill him.

In this Gospel episode we see Jesus standing up to his townspeople, his kin. He did so because he was fully aware what his mission entailed, and was determined to carry it out. He came to bring God's salvation and healing to the entire world, not just to a particular Jewish town or a single people. Jesus stood up and "passed through the midst of them" moving away from an angry mob to continue his mission. This was a very meaningful act showing that no opposition or threat of violence, even that coming from those closest to him, would change his mind. With clarity of purpose, Jesus walked away from the self-concerned and narrow-minded crowd, moving on to carry on with his task.

Going against popular expectations and demands was a common feature in the life of God's prophets and servants, as described in the Scripture. Jeremiah faced a lifelong struggle with, and rejection by, his own people and the leaders, to whom he declared God's will. He prevailed because he relied on God's help. Paul spoke to his difficult Corinthian community with clarity and decisiveness, insisting on the right practices and attitudes. Even when disowned by them, he did not change his teaching, being firmly convinced that his understanding of the Christian community and the role of the charismatic gifts was correct. Jesus openly told

his townsfolk what his mission was about. Since it did not meet their expectations, he was rejected and threatened with violence. Nonetheless, he carried on with his work because he had a clear sense of the purpose and character of his ministry. The examples of Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus show that going against the grain is never easy, but it is possible with God's help, and with the clarity of purpose and understanding. These are the attitudes shared by those who can confidently state with the Psalmist, "O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Today's liturgy brings before our eyes three biblical and prophetic figures. They are prophetic because of their determination to fulfill their God-given tasks no matter what. The chief task of the prophet is not to predict the future but make known God's will and judgment regarding the present. Such prophetic figures have been appearing throughout history. One might think of Archbishop Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, or Nelson Mandela and many others as examples of the prophets of our day. First, we must give thanks to our Lord for sending us such people, such prophets, who face tremendous difficulties and often persecution so that we might hear God's message with clarity. Because that message is often challenging, these prophets face frequent opposition and rejection. Still they do not hesitate to make great sacrifices to make God heard and known.

It is very important to be able to distinguish a false prophet from a genuine one. In some Christian Churches prophets are simply preachers who can shout loud enough and speak so convincingly as to make others think that they are God's own voice. Some of them are genuine, others are plainly crooks and cheats.

First, genuine representatives of God on earth never work for their own advantage or benefit. A friend recently visited one of African countries which has been suffering from years of economic crisis and political strife. Traveling on official government business, he was taken on a brief sight-seeing tour, and spotted a huge palace built on a side of a local hill, surrounded by beautiful gardens and high walls. It turned out that this is the house of "God's prophet" - a leader of a local sect whose career as a spokesperson for God brought him a fortune while his followers struggled for daily bread! One wonders what Jeremiah and Paul would have to say about this! Jeremiah lived his life as an impoverished outcast, and his preaching brought him great trouble and unpopularity. Paul, in no uncertain terms stated that preaching the gospel without any payment is a defining mark of a true apostle (cf. 1 Cor 9:18; 2 Cor 11:7).

Second, a true messenger of God is one who has a deep and sound knowledge and understanding of his faith and tradition. He or she is a mature Christian whose beliefs are not based merely on hearsay and custom, but on a personal experience of God and an intense study

of Scripture and Church teaching. On such basis, a true prophet can speak an unpopular message to his own people, and to point out and critique false beliefs and practices, just as Jeremiah did.

Third, a true prophet understands his or her vocation, and faithfully purses the goal of their work. They persist in their work despite opposition, not bending to the wishes and demands even of those closest to them following the example of Jesus.

Our Church communities need such prophets, those willing to "go against the grain". They can keep us on track and prevent our human weaknesses, complacency and plain laziness distorting our faith. Most importantly however, we learn today that each one of us can and should be a prophet, even if only in a small measure. We are priestly and prophetic people of God. We have clear examples to follow and, above all, we have God who can and will sustain us in our prophetic mission.

PROVERB

*"If a snake
does not act
like a snake,
little children
will use it
to tie firewood."*

ACTION

Self-examination:

When was the last time that I acted like a prophet in a manner of Jeremiah, Paul or Jesus? What did I do?

Am I a person of clear convictions and beliefs? If so, what they are based on? If not, where can I look to acquire them?

Response to God:

My prayer this week will be that of thanksgiving for those people that God has sent into this world, and into my life, who have declared and taught me God's ways.

Response to your World:

I will determine one specific way where I can act prophetically and will courageously do so.

Can our group be in any way considered prophetic in the sense outlined by today's readings and reflections? We will discuss a single measure or action we can take that could be considered prophetic.

PRAYER

*Lord God,
we thank you
for sending your prophets
and messengers
into our world.
Through them
you taught us your ways,
and revealed to us your will.
Empower and enlighten us
so that we can also,
even in a small measure,
make the world aware of you,
your ways and your judgments
so that your kingdom
can draw near to all.
Amen.*