

TWENTY-SECOND
SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A



FIRST READING

Jeremiah 20:7–9

PSALM

Psalms 63:2–6, 8–9

SECOND READING

Romans 12:1–2

GOSPEL

Matthew 16:21–27

Prayer

Psalms 63:2–6, 8–9

O God, you are my God,
I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.

So I have looked upon
you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power
and glory.

Because your steadfast
love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long
as I live;
I will lift up my hands and
call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with
a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you
with joyful lips for you
have been my help,

and in the shadow of your
wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds
me.

Reading the Word

Jeremiah 20:7–9

O LORD, you have enticed
me, and I was enticed; you
have overpowered me, and

you have prevailed. I have
become a laughingstock all
day long; everyone mocks
me. For whenever I speak, I
must cry out, I must shout,
“Violence and destruction!”

For the word of the LORD has
become for me a reproach
and derision all day long. If I
say, “I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his
name,” then within me there
is something like a burning
fire shut up in my bones; I
am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

Romans 12:1–2

I appeal to you therefore,
brothers and sisters, by the
mercies of God, to present
your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to
God, which is your spiritual
worship. Do not be con-
formed to this world, but be
transformed by the renew-
ing of your minds, so that
you may discern what is the
will of God—what is good
and acceptable and perfect.

Matthew 16:21–27

From that time on, Jesus
began to show his disciples
that he must go to Jerusa-
lem and undergo great suf-
fering at the hands of the

elders and chief priests and
scribes, and be killed, and on
the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside
and began to rebuke him,
saying, “God forbid it, Lord!
This must never happen to
you.” But he turned and said
to Peter, “Get behind me,
Satan! You are a stumbling
block to me; for you are
setting your mind not on
divine things but on human
things.”

Then Jesus told his disciples,
“If any want to become my
followers, let them deny
themselves and take up
their cross and follow me.
For those who want to save
their life will lose it, and
those who lose their life for
my sake will find it. For what
will it profit them if they
gain the whole world but
forfeit their life? Or what
will they give in return for
their life? “For the Son of
Man is to come with his
angels in the glory of his
Father, and then he will
repay everyone for what
has been done.

*Scripture quotations from
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Hearing the Word

“Fleeing from God”

Saints and heroes of faith – men and women who faithfully carried out their God-given mission are admired and often venerated. Yet, the very same saints frequently faced overwhelming struggles and were plagued by doubt and temptation. Today’s liturgy calls attention to this often overlooked, aspect of their lives, and shows how they dealt with it. The passage from the book of Jeremiah is sometimes called “Jeremiah’s Gethsemane”. The prophet speaks in the context of his struggle with the priest Pashhur, who had Jeremiah beaten and imprisoned (Jer 20:1-2). The reason for this severe treatment was the prophet’s message of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, because of the people’s infidelity and violation of the covenant with God. On account of his preaching, the prophet was branded a disloyal traitor, and his message a subversive and disheartening fiction that offended and threatened what the Israelites held most sacred – the holy city and the Temple. When eventually released, Jeremiah turned to God with words of bitter challenge and complaint. He accused God of forcing him to become a prophet of doom, entrusted with delivering a message of impending and irreversible destruction.

Jeremiah loved the Temple, the city and his people. He

would have liked nothing better than to deliver words of comfort and reassurance. Instead, seeing the reality, he was forced to prophesy the inevitable end of all he held dear. He had hoped that by predicting the disaster, he would be able to turn the hearts of the people back to God, and thus change the future. Instead, his mission was a failure, as the leaders and the people reacted to his words with insults, threats, physical abuse and rejection. It was this failure that made Jeremiah turn to God with bitter complaint about being sent on a mission that was doomed to fail from the start.

As a young man, Jeremiah willingly agreed to become God’s mouthpiece. But, having experienced failure and persecution, he declared that he would speak in the name of God no longer; he renounced his mission and intended to flee from God. In the end, however, Jeremiah found himself incapable of abandoning his thankless task. He felt the word of God burning within him like a consuming fire, which he was unable to contain. Despite the pain and disillusionment, this tragic prophet still found himself compelled to continue his proclamation.

The second reading contains an opening section of the final part of the letter to the Romans which is devoted to exhortations and admonitions, aimed at guiding the life of Christians in Rome. In his first words, Paul exhorts

the Romans to offer themselves as a living sacrifice in service to God. He contrasts this offering with adherence to “the world”, by which Paul means the broader Roman society and its pagan ways and practices. Using the language of sacrifice, Paul indicates that Christian life ought to be different, sometimes even contradictory, to the way of life most people followed. Offering one’s body as a sacrifice meant exposing oneself to ridicule and rejection on account of one’s faith. At the same time, it also meant altering one’s mind in order to discern God’s will and follow it.

Advancement in holiness is a conscious act of the human will, expressed in and through deliberate choices. Paul urged his audience to adhere to God with their mind and will. Conforming oneself to the ways of the world represents a flight from God while the offering of life to God leads to a deeper union with him. It was much easier for the Roman Christians to follow the pagan ways of their day. Yet, this would have amounted to fleeing from God, which was something that Paul desperately wanted them to avoid.

The Gospel passage continues the narrative of the last Sunday, and presents the reaction of Jesus to being called the Messiah (“Christ”) by Peter. Peter, in calling Jesus the Messiah, correctly recognized that Jesus came into the world to carry out

God's mission of salvation. In today's passage Jesus reveals what that mission entails. Shockingly for his disciples, he stated that being the Messiah meant going to the cross and suffering a brutal death. At this point in his life, Jesus was fully aware of the fate that awaited him and was ready to embrace it. However, in the final moments before his arrest, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus showed fear and a reluctance to accept this terrible fate. Still, fully understanding the implications of his decision, he declared his readiness to fulfill God's will (cf. Mk 14:36). Peter stands very much in contrast to Jesus. Despite being declared the Church's leader, Peter, hearing his master's declaration about the impending death, attempted to change Jesus' mind stating that such a cruel fate can never befall him. Jesus responded by calling him "Satan". Satan is God's adversary who tries to undermine the execution of God's will in the world and frustrate God's plans. Peter, by attempting to persuade Jesus not to accept his mission and the fate connected with it, acted like Satan.

Jesus resisted Peter and went even further by emphasizing that carrying the cross is an integral part of his disciple's life. Fleeing from suffering means fleeing from God and losing not only the privilege of being a disciple in this world, but also being subjected to

judgement and rejection in the world to come.

Just as any commitment in life comes at a cost, so does the commitment to God. For Jeremiah, being a prophet came at the price of ridicule and persecution combined with the loss of status, isolation and internal struggle. Yet, he remained convinced that his message was true and his mission necessary. Despite the temptation to flee from it all, Jeremiah knew, deep in his heart, that the only reasonable option was to continue, which he did. For Paul, Christianity meant adherence to God rather than alignment with the ways and ideas of the society of his day. The choice was to adhere to God and flee from the world or to flee from God and adhere to the world. He admonished his faithful in Rome to choose the former as the true expression of praise and worship. Peter wanted to eliminate suffering from the life of Jesus, and perhaps his own. To this end, he attempted to change Jesus' mind about the cross. Later, when confronted in the high-priest's courtyard, he denied Jesus to save his own life. He chose to flee from his master and disowned his commitments. While human preoccupations and weaknesses might drive a disciple to choose an easier way and, like Peter, to flee from God's demanding path, it is also clear from today's readings that, deep inside, a person committed to God knows the right choice and

the right path. Both Jeremiah and Peter, despite failures eventually continued as faithful servants. What is needed to avoid fleeing from God, or to return after such flight has happened, is the training of one's mind to discern God's will and draw the strength from prayer. The Psalmist knew this when he stated, "you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me."

Listening to the Word of God

In our contemporary world "fleeing" from commitments and sacrifice is the new norm! Technology makes this easy. For example, Facebook has options for accepting friends and "unfriending" them with one click! Further, new psychological trends, self-help books and motivational speakers encourage us to do what is best for our own welfare. This self-centered perspective affects every area of our lives including family relationships, work, Church membership, and social responsibilities. With so many choices and options available, one can "shop around" for experiences and relationships whenever one is not pleased with what they have. These flights from existing relationships and commitments occur particularly when hardships or conflicts develop. The high dropout rate at universities and constant changing of courses, mushrooming of churches and the phe-

nomenon of “Christian tourism”, trading in relationships on social media and a high divorce rate, are just a few examples of this tendency to flee towards what attracts. These flights, in turn, exemplify a deeper problem of the lack of firm commitment to another person which occurs when one of the partners is unhappy or meets someone else, or when the demands of morality and social responsibility are seen as burdensome and unrealistic. This applies also to commitment to God when, again, in times of hardship or when prayers and expectations are not met, we drift away from God in search of other ways to reach security and fulfillment.

This high fluidity and constant change are clear signs that we are on the run, and indicate that we ought to pause and ask ourselves, “what are we fleeing from?”, and “what is creating chaos in our relationships with each other and with God?”.

Often the answer is simple – we are fleeing from commitment, loyalty and sacrifice. These values are seen as old fashioned and, in some cases, as the perpetuation of abusive and limiting circumstances. Indeed, there are times when it is legitimate to flee from relationships that are harmful to one’s wellbeing, particularly in cases of abuse and violence. These are legitimate and needed forms of self-protection. Yet, in many other cases, it is the firm commitment and deci-

sion to be loyal to people and circumstances which we do not find pleasant or appealing.

Our world has been changed by those who are willing to sacrifice, endure hardship and stay loyal to their commitments. Think of the liberation struggles for independence which would not have succeeded, except for people who were willing to sacrifice out of love for their people, and a vision for liberation. God calls us to reflect these qualities in our lives, because without them our relationships and dreams will not reach their fulfillment, and we will find ourselves wandering aimlessly, jumping from one commitment to another, accomplishing little or nothing in the end. It is never too late to stop our flight from God, and from those who need us, and be guided by the values of sacrifice, commitment and loyalty. These, in the end, will matter and will make our life meaningful.

Proverb

“Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.”

Action

Self-examination

Reflect on the values of sacrifice, loyalty and commitment and how you apply these in your relationships, work, parish life and relationship with God. Ask yourself: Am I, in any way, “fleeing” from these commitments?

What is my greatest life struggle when it comes to my Christian commitments? What makes is a struggle and how could I alleviate it?

Response to God

Ponder the following question: “In what ways am I fleeing from God / fleeing to God?” On the basis of this reflection make a daily prayer for perseverance, taking Jeremiah as your example.

Response to your World

I will choose one difficult commitment or task which I have been putting off, and, with the help of prayer, complete it this week.

“Sacrifice and loyalty change the world”. In our group we reflect on how we can make this statement true in the context of our communal activities.

Prayer

Dear Lord, day after day I pray to see you more clearly, to love you more dearly and to follow you ever more nearly. This day by day I pray. Amen.