

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Jeremiah 23:1-6

Jeremiah is classed as the second of the four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, & Daniel). They are called “major” because of the length of the works attributed to them. Jeremiah is another of the reluctant prophets – he frequently protests, in his conversations with God, his dislike of proclaiming the message of destruction. He lived at the same time as Ezekiel (who we studied two weeks ago) and also at the same time as Zephaniah, Nahum, & Baruch (who was his secretary). Jeremiah came from a priestly family and was called by God as an adolescent (628 B.C.). His ministry lasted about 40 years. In order to make it clear that it is God’s words he is reporting, he uses the phrase “says the Lord” 338 times in his writing.

At the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry we find that Palestine is divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Part of Israel is a province of Assyria and the rest, along with Judah, is an Assyrian vassal state. The Assyrians had been the leading power in the near east for about 200 years and as a result of political influence Judah has experienced a resurgence of idolatry. The Assyrian empire, however, had crumbled and after about 625 B.C. there was no effective Assyrian government in Palestine. In 621 B.C. the Book of the Law was discovered in the Temple and Josiah (king 639-609 B.C.) led a thorough reform in Judah which extended into the northern kingdom. This was a move of independence and it must be assumed that a number of people had remained faithful to God’s covenant and supported the king. During Josiah’s reign a solemn ceremony was conducted and the Mosaic covenant was renewed. There followed total destruction of all the high places where idolatrous practices were performed which kept Jerusalem as a unique cultic center. Josiah died in 609 B.C. (some historians think he was assassinated while others believe he died in battle). His son Jehoahaz was proclaimed king by the people but 3 months later was taken prisoner and brought to Egypt. Jehoiakim was installed as king by Pharaoh Necco III. Jeremiah upbraided him for his servility to the Egyptians, saying it would cause his downfall and ruin the country. Jeremiah had not favored pacts against the Medes and had prophesied that the Babylonians would prevail and that Jerusalem would be destroyed. In 605 B.C. all Syria and Palestine came under the control of Babylon and their king, Nebuchadnezzar.

When Jehoiakim died in 597 (probably assassinated) he was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin who 3 months later surrendered to the Babylonians and was deported along with the queen mother, the entire court, many nobles and people of every class except the poorest (Ezekiel was among these exiles). Zedekiah was installed as the newest (and last) king of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar. Today’s reading is an oracle about this last king.

Jeremiah and Baruch had stayed behind during the deportation but later were taken by some of their countrymen to Egypt. The temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Jewish tradition has it that Jeremiah was starved to death by his fellow exiles.

23:1 Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says the LORD.

The reference here is to bad shepherds – the kings.

2 Therefore,

Whenever this word appears, look to see what it is “there” for. It draws a conclusion or summarizes a teaching just made.

thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, against the shepherds who shepherd my people: You have scattered my sheep and driven them away. You have not cared for them, but I will take care to punish your evil deeds. ³ I myself will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands to which I have driven them and bring them back to their meadow;

God Himself is taking control; the rulers have failed in their job.

there they shall increase and multiply. ⁴ I will appoint shepherds for them who will shepherd them so that they need no longer fear and tremble; and none shall be missing, says the LORD. ⁵ Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD,

The term “the days are coming” is simply a means of calling attention to a very solemn proclamation.

when I will raise up a righteous shoot to David;

A classic term synonymous with the Messiah (see Isaiah 11:1)

As king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah shall be saved, Israel shall dwell in security.

Both Judah and Israel will share in the salvation of the messiah.

This is the name they give him: “The LORD our justice.”

This is a word play on Zedekiah’s name. Zedekiah means “my justice is God” and here the Messiah is given the name “God is our justice.” Isaiah had already given a similar name to this future king “Emmanuel” (God is with us) (Isaiah 7:14). Justice means both God’s saving

present and action.

Comment: The ideal kingship (one which will realize the blessings of the covenant) can be seen in 2 Samuel 7 and is repeated in Psalms 2, 45, 72, 89, & 110. Prophets in dark times when kings were unfaithful, recalled this and promised its realization in the future using terms similar to those of Jeremiah here (Isaiah 9:5-6; 11:1-9; Micah 5:1-5; Amos 9:11; Hosea 3:5).

Like his predecessors, Jeremiah predicts the restoration of the Davidic dynasty, not necessarily politically, but on the level of the religious and moral obligations of the covenant. As Peter Kreeft said in his book *The God Who Loves You* (Servant Books, Ann Arbor, MI, 1988), "Prophets are like fingers, not like faces. We are not meant to look at them but to the reality to which they point."

2nd Reading - Ephesians 2:13-18

Last week's second reading was the prayer of blessing in which God's plan is revealed and accomplished (Ephesians 1:3-14). We now move along to the section of St. Paul's letter which describes the union of Jew and Gentile.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace,

Through His death on the cross Christ has abolished the division of mankind into Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles, who had been excluded from the old covenant, and the accompanying blessings, are now included in the New Covenant on an equal basis with the Jews. A covenant which has been ritually accomplished with the blood of Christ. Jesus' obedience to God's wishes, to the point of a sacrificial death, has atoned for the disobedience of Adam, and also for the sin of the golden calf. (see also Colossians 1:20-22). Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6; Micah 5:4).

he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity,

Not only an emotional barrier but a physical one as well. Josephus tells us that in the temple there was a stone wall 3 cubits (approximately 6 feet) high separating the outer court from the inner court (*The Wars of the Jews*, 5.5.2§193-194). On this wall were signs prohibiting any foreigner from going further under the pain of death.

"Thus was the first enclosure, in the midst of which, and not far from it, was the second, to be gone up to by a few steps; this was encompassed by a stone wall for a partition, with an inscription, which forbade any foreigner to go in, under pain of death." (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.11.5§417).

In Acts 21:28-31 we see the crowd trying to kill Paul because they thought he had brought an Ephesian Gentile into the Temple and thereby defiled it; Gentiles being unclean because they were mere idolaters. This could also be a reference to the veil which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place.

“The law that He abolished was that which had been given to the Jews concerning circumcision and new moons and food and sacrifices and the Sabbath. He ordered it to cease because it was a burden, In this way He made peace” (The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*, Ephesians 2:15).

through his flesh,

Certainly by His death, quite possibly a Eucharistic reference.

¹⁵ abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims,

Because they are now a holy nation, a nation of priests, the requirements of the Levitical law are no longer applicable. They are no longer God’s servants/slaves but his children and the need for the old law has been fulfilled (Matthew 5:17). The old law had precepts of a moral, legal, and liturgical type. The moral precepts still hold but with greater weight and meaning. The legal and liturgical precepts applied to slaves/servants, not to free people of God. The law of the Old Testament (Covenant), although from God and therefore good and holy, created an unbridgeable gap between God and man because man, by himself, could not keep the Law (Acts 15:7-11). Christ, through grace, has created a new man who can keep the very essence of the law -- obedience (which is the living out of love).

that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace,

Jesus is the new man because he is the new Adam – the one who stands for both Jew and Gentile. We, the Church, are the body of Christ.

“Don’t you see? The Greek does not have to become a Jew. Rather both enter into a new condition. His aim is not to bring Greek believers into being as different kinds of Jews but rather to create both anew. Rightly he uses the term ‘create’ rather than ‘change’ to point out the great effect of what God has done. Even though the creation is invisible it is no less a creation of its Creator” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392-397), *Homilies On The Epistle To The Ephesians*, 5,2,13-15].

¹⁶ and might reconcile both with God, in one body,

One Church, one faith, one body of Christ.

through the cross,

By becoming the one perfect sacrifice which inaugurates the New Covenant.

putting that enmity to death by it. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near,

Points out the fulfillment of Isaiah 57:19b.

¹⁸ for through him we both have access

Prior to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, man was excluded from the Father's house; he lived more like a slave than a son (Galatians 4:1-5); he had no inheritance. Now we have the spirit of sonship and with it the right of inheritance (Romans 8:15-17).

in one Spirit to the Father.

This implies two basic facts:

- 1) Christians are bound together by the Holy Spirit who acts in them.
- 2) The Holy Spirit is always present and continually active in the Church, the mystical body of Christ.

Comment: Notice that we have references to "him," "Spirit" and "Father" This is a Trinitarian formula. Through Jesus' humanity, the source of the Spirit, men can approach God the Father. Note also the prepositions: access to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.

Gospel - Mark 6:30-34

Last week's Gospel reading told of the sending out of the apostles two by two. This week we skip over an interlude concerning the beheading of John the Baptist and now the apostles return.

³⁰ The apostles gathered together with Jesus

This is the only place in the Gospel of Mark where the twelve are called "apostles" - one who is sent. They are usually called disciples - students. In the verse immediately preceding our reading today, St. Mark refers to John the Baptist's disciples and thus must refer to the twelve as apostles for reasons of clarity.

and reported all they had done and taught.

An interesting phrase because their commission when they were sent out two by two was to preach redemption. This is quite possibly a post-resurrection viewpoint which is being

expressed.

31 He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. 32 So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place.

Like when Jesus had returned home to Nazareth (10th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B). This shows the intensity of Jesus’ public ministry. A Christian must be ready to sacrifice his time and rest in service of the Gospel. This attitude should lead us to change our plans when the good of souls is at stake. But Jesus also teaches here to have the common sense not to go to extremes with which we cannot physically cope. St. Bede The Venerable, in commenting on this passage, said “The Lord makes his disciples rest, to show those in charge that people who work or preach cannot do so without breaks.” (*Homilies on the Gospels*, 2, 21).

33 People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them.

The crowd, on foot, beat Jesus and His disciples in their boat. The crowd was not expected. Because they were to travel without food, this sets the stage for the multiplication of the loaves which we will hear next week.

34 When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them,

Not only is he not annoyed, he shows compassion. He recognizes their spiritual need and changes His plans and begins to preach.

for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

This depicts Jesus as the Good Shepherd (See Numbers 27:17, 1 Kings 22:17, Ezekiel 34:5-6). Jesus takes care of the people.