

Homily of Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year A, 2020

Jeremiah 20:10-13; Psalm 69:10-17, 33-35; Romans 5:12-15; Matthew 10:26-33

Jeremiah was one of the prophets God sent to prophesy to the people of Israel to turn from their sinful ways or they would face divine judgment. Jeremiah prophesied that since the people had failed to repent of their evil ways, a foreign power was going to conquer them, take them captives, and destroy the temple and Jerusalem. For such prophecy, Jeremiah was persecuted and was nearly killed. The first reading was a prayer of Jeremiah while he was being persecuted.

The Gospel was Jesus' encouragement to his apostles. He told them to be fearless in proclaiming the Good News. He reminded them that, later on, their proclamation of the Good News would attract persecution. He assured them that they should not be discouraged by the persecution that would occur because their sustenance would come from God.

Violent persecution of Christians is going on in some parts of the world. In those places, Christians are killed, churches are burned, and properties are destroyed. In some places, Christians' rights and privileges are denied them, and taken away from them.

Another type of persecution is anti-Christian policies set in motion and promoted by some governments, some media outlets, some institutions and some organizations. Some countries' leadership no longer consider the fact that their countries' foundations were built according to Christian principles. In some of these countries and places, Christian principles, symbols and identifications are condemned as offensive. The removal of Christian religious education from public schools in some countries and places is a ploy to destroy Christian Spirituality from its root. The suppression of Christian values creates the rise and spread of anti-Christian theories and practices. The drastically reduced number of Christians in the Western World and the rise and spread of non-Christian and anti-Christian ideologies, beliefs and practices can be seen as a direct impact of aggression against Christianity.

In the face of these kinds of persecution, Jesus tells us in today's Gospel not to be afraid or discouraged. Jesus says, "... Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul ... Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father..." By this statement, Jesus commands us to continue to acknowledge him to the world in every way possible as the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus encourages the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, "... Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. ... Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father..." St. Paul speaks to the leadership of the Church in the following words: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:1-5). If the leadership of the Church is resilient, the flock of God remain confident. If the leadership is frightened, the flock become discouraged.

Jeremiah represents messengers of truth who are persecuted, silenced, or eliminated everywhere: in our homes, neighborhoods, groups, work places, institutions, organizations, churches, countries, and so on. Jesus encourages messengers of truth, "... Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. ... Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father..."

Jesus not only encourages us to stand firm in the face of persecution, he demands that we pray for persecutors. Jesus says, "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). We are to pray for persecutors' repentance and conversion. We pray as Jeremiah prayed in the first reading that "persecutors will stumble; they will not prevail. In their failure they will be put to utter shame, to lasting, unforgettable confusion." We are to pray that their hearts of stone may change to hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

Finally, it is easy for me to see persecution out there but fail to recognize how I persecute others by my dealings with them or by my attitude to them. Do I, purposely, set out to frustrate, irritate, annoy, hurt, disturb, discourage anyone? Do I deny anyone what is due to him or her? Do I punish anyone because of my mischievous motives? Do I click or gang up against anyone or any group for ungodly reasons? Did I make any decision based on oppressing, maltreating, bullying, torturing, silencing, or eliminating anyone? O God, help me to be true to myself and be honest with myself. Amen.

Fr Martin Eke, MSP