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Proper 7 • Jeremiah 20:7–13 • June 22, 2014

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Conflicting Messages

On this day the church in worship ponders God’s “unfailing love” (gradual) and “never-failing providence” (collect). The church prays to God to put away from her all hurtful things and provide for her all things profitable. As in the prophetic words of Jeremiah, in Matthew 10 our Lord’s words ring true that the Lord’s faithful will face persecution from authorities and betrayal from family for his sake and the gospel. Matthew 10:22 reads, “All men will hate you on account of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” Altogether, the thought of the day calls for confidence in the word amid the conflicts endured by God’s people.

Notes on the Text

Jeremiah, like other prophets, was directed to employ symbolic acts to accent the message God has for the people. Our text follows the account of the prophet smashing

a clay jar (19:1–12) symbolizing the way God will smash the nation of Israel for their apostasy: for their turning the land God gave them into “a place of foreign gods” and pagan sacrifice (19:4). Seven chapters later, the prophet walks with a yoke of crossbars strapped around his neck. This act was symbolic of Israel’s political submission to the Babylonians. God’s own people will be in exile, inevitably. God will let the Babylonians dominate Israel, and bring Israel under its yoke (27:11). In his fury and wrath, God will turn his own people over to foreigners. God himself will do this with outstretched hand and strong arm (21:5), the very arm and hand that rescued them from their oppressors in Egypt (Ex 6:6). God rescues. God punishes. God binds his people. God delivers.

Through his pronouncements, Jeremiah is striking at the foundation of the authorities and powers in Israel (20:1–6). The false prophets and officers of God’s people were misguiding and misleading them away from God’s plan for them. Jeremiah is delivering a scathing attack on these authorities. In fact the prophet renamed the chief officer, “terror from every side,” a play on words. This leader actually is a terror to him and to all who follow him as their leader.

The prophetic function normally is twofold. It is one of foretelling and forth telling. Prophetic utterances have their implications for the present, imminently as they are spoken as well as for the future. Sadly, these words are not heeded when they are spoken to the intended audience. They must be spoken, nevertheless. Jeremiah decries this predicament that he is in (v. 9). God’s words are in his heart as it were, “a burning fire shut up in his bones,” and he could hold it in no longer. God’s words, especially the words God put in the prophet’s heart, breaks his heart as it were.

Proclaiming the prophetic word leads to isolation of the prophet. Throughout this periscope, Jeremiah laments his experience as he summarizes them especially in verse 10. His own friends are waiting for him to slip. He hears the whisper from many, “There is terror on every side.” His enemies might take revenge on him and overpower him. They think they will prevail and overthrow his case against him.

The prophetic word is indeed a word of deliverance. This word is Yahweh’s word that bestows on his people his unfailing love, and never-failing providence. In the end, the righteous people of God will be delivered from the enemies and the oppressors. God will rescue his people from the wicked. Surely, he will test his righteous (v. 12), and he will deliver his people from the evildoers (v. 13). The final victory is the Lord’s. He sees the heart and mind of his people (v. 12) and his deliverance is cause for them to sing his praises.

These themes echo throughout the New Testament. The reading from Romans (6:13–22) is but one example that brings these lessons to bear on the individual on a personal level.

The Lord’s own life and ministry on earth is the supreme example of this, and that is precisely to where these lessons point. The appointed gospel lesson calls attention to its implications for the Christian community as much as it anchors its life on earth in the name and for the sake of her Savior and Lord.

The incarnate Word, the very Son of God, faced resistance and opposition, especially from his own people as he walked the face of this earth, proclaiming the rule and

reign of God (e. g., Jn 1:11). St. Paul's missionary life paralleled that of his Lord's. Acts 13 is but one account of the rejection of Paul's preaching by his own people the Jews, and Acts 14 depicts the confusion and the misunderstanding that came about him and his proclamation among the Gentiles in the towns of Iconium and Lystra.

The preacher has so much here to draw from, to develop his own proclamation of the crucified Christ to his audience that lives today in the milieu of pluralism and inclusivism.