

Fr. John's Homily for 9-3-23, 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

JMJ CHS

I have always been kinda curious about the book of the prophet Jeremiah. I first read it as a layman many years ago when I came across the passage that we just read today, “*You duped me Lord, and I let myself be duped.*” Well, what does that mean? Is God some kind of a trickster? Does he play jokes on us? Does he mislead us?

Then, at a certain point after I got my call to the priesthood, I began to read those words through different eyes. And even now, as a priest I can relate to Jeremiah's frustration. It's like that last scene of *The Chosen* where Peter is arguing with Jesus face-to-face there on the water. The implication is that Peter feels he has somehow been tricked by Jesus and he is angry, he shut down and he became very quiet and wouldn't speak about Jesus.

Have you ever been in that situation? I have. Your prayers stop. You become silent. You question God in your heart. You wonder if He truly cares. And you puzzle over his *mysterious, unsearchable and inscrutable ways*. Ways that often conflict with your ways?

I am now 74 years old and 22 years into my priesthood and there are still more things that I can relate to from the prophet Jeremiah. When he was called, he complained. He felt inadequate. “*I'm too young,*” he said. But God retorts. “*Don't say that. You are not too young. I will put my words in your mouth and you are to courageously speak them to the people. Be firm and steadfast.*”

When God first approached me with the idea of priesthood, I couldn't say that I was too young – I felt that I was too old. But that didn't work either. The answer was the same for both the prophet and for me, the old guy, “Be not afraid” because “*I do not call the equipped. But I equip.... the called.*” And the Lord did indeed equip Jeremiah, but as for me, well, that's your call. You will have to decide for yourselves whether or not I have been equipped to speak on God's behalf.

The passage went on to say that Jeremiah resolved that he would *be quiet* and say nothing more about God. He was too angry. He felt humiliated, mocked and a laughing stock among the people. He had put up with too much persecution from his fellow Jews and he'd had enough. Finally, there in those last lines, Jeremiah repented and said that as hard as he tried, he could not hold it in. He was compelled to speak out about God. It welled up within him, and spilled out from him, and he spoke out against those stiff-necked people. Finally, in a later passage, God will reassure Jeremiah, telling him that he would not abandon him but would give him strength to be a “*wall of brass*” against the rebellious House of Israel.

OK. Now, for the Gospel. It is actually a ‘Part B’, a continuation from last week's reading from Matthew so we are still talking about the foundations of our Church and the papacy.

Last week Jesus spoke of His intentions of founding an Assembly of Believers, His Universal Catholic Church, and to put one man at the head of it. Simon Peter was the first, and Francis is the current Holy Father. There have been over 260. *And the gates of hell have still not prevailed against it.*

Now today, we have moved on from Caesarea Philippi and Jesus tells the Disciples that He is heading towards Jerusalem, where He will be arrested, condemned and put to death. Well, Peter had a different opinion. He takes Jesus aside and proceeds to '*stick his foot in his mouth.*' "Nonononono.. I don't think so. Over my dead body. I most certainly will not allow you to be put to death." And then we have that famous retort, "*Get behind me Satan*". Wow. First, Jesus tells him that He will build his Church upon him, and now, almost in the same breath, He calls him the devil. Not the *gracious* Jesus that we always talk about.

So. What's going on here? Well, Peter has an issue, and it is one that we all suffer from. The problem is that we think like human beings, not like God. The problem began with Adam and Eve and continues with us, even to this very day. We think like this because we are ... fallen human beings, not to mention the fact that we are daily tempted by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But, as for Simon Peter, well, maybe we can forgive him. He was brand new on the job after all. But it would actually take a long time before he would finally "get it". He will continue to '*stick his foot in his mouth*'. He will say and do dumb things right up to the betrayal, and even beyond. He would be corrected many times by Jesus, even in the time after the resurrection leading up to the Ascension. Even St. Paul corrected Peter. But the fisherman humbly accepted those corrections and went on to lead the early Church and ultimately to suffer a martyr's death. And in the fullness of God's time, it all came full circle when they built a big church over his grave and named it after him. And it gives new meaning to that quote from last week, "*...and upon this rock, I will build My Church.*" The bones of Simon, now the "fisher of men", Peter, Cephas, the 'Rock', his relics lie directly beneath the altar of Saint Peter's basilica in Rome.

In last week's homily I implied that after a long string of strong leaders, a lot of people nowadays have concerns about where we are now and where we are going. Pope Francis has done a number of wonderful things. He has a heart for the poor. He leads a simple life in imitation of Christ. He scored some points with me when he instituted several new Marian feast days. And like me, he drives a Ford Focus.

But there are a number of other things coming out of the Vatican that have caused a great deal of concern. Again, we have some very wise and devout people out there who have spoken about these things. If you don't know what I'm talking about, you are obliged, repeat ... obliged to do your homework. Seek out some of those individuals. You should look at the Catholic news outlets. There are various websites you can go to like our FORMED app and we have *Ave Maria Radio* nearby. You ought to listen to the afternoon radio show called *Kresta in the Afternoon*. Al Kresta is a very smart man. EWTN, *The Eternal Word Television Network* has a news show hosted by Raymond Arroyo talking about all things Catholic. Listen and learn.

But in my opinion the best source right now is Dr. Ralph Martin from Ann Arbor's *Renewal Ministries*. He certainly is a respected and trustworthy source of information. Look him up on YouTube. Type in his name and you will find two back-to-back presentations called, "*Where we are being led*". Pretty shocking stuff.

So again, please do your homework but watch out for those false teachers. We have been warned about them from the beginning. Prayerful discernment and study are required to follow the right path. We cannot afford to be complacent.

I said many times before that a good starting point for understanding what is happening in our world in these times is to recognize that we are in a spiritual battle. St. Paul told us that *our battle is not with flesh and blood, but with the principalities and powers of this present darkness*. The devil is exerting his influence on this world and many are falling for it. Because, we are all thinking, like men.

And it is not limited to His Church. It is happening all over the secular world as well. Take a look at what has happened here these past few years. Our country is split between conservatives and progressives. Families are divided. Young against old and old against young. Husbands and wives against each other. High divorce rates. Families suffer because of many things including addictions to pornography. Marijuana is available everywhere now as a recreational drug. People are depressed. Kids committing suicide. Mass murders.

We are a country that was founded on Christian values, but now that is all being challenged. There are fellow Americans out there who would throw out our Constitution saying it is outdated and needs to be revised. There are revisionists who say that the Founding Fathers did not have Christianity in mind when they wrote our founding documents.

But, back to the Church. I once had a friend who was progressively inclined and she gave me a book by the radical Episcopalian, Bishop John Spong. The title was, *The Church Must Change or Die*. I always found that kind of interesting. It is something like what Peter told Jesus in today's Gospel. Jesus, you must change your tune or you are going to die. But that was God's plan. And that is why Jesus reprimanded Peter. He was interfering with the mysterious Will of God.

Now do you suppose that the same principle applies to the Universal Church? Should we embrace our cross or should we cave-in to the demands of the culture and change in order to survive the culture that says to the Church, *come down off your throne, and be one of us*. I know these are hard words but Jesus spoke hard words. And it cost Him. He lost Disciples. And in the end, even lost His life. But we know the rest of the story.

I took a little heat last week after the homily ... some think I had crossed the line and was disrespectful of Pope Francis. But I was no less disrespectful of Peter as well. One lady, however, thanked me for addressing "*the elephant in the living room*." From my personal perspective, I feel that if I don't speak these things to you I would be guilty of *pastoral malpractice*. No different than a doctor who would not tell his patient to stop smoking or eat properly and to exercise. No different than Jeremiah, who would not talk about God anymore.

So with that in mind, we will return to the subject, yet again, next week as we continue to talk about Christ, His popes, His priesthood and His people.

~Fr. John