

Twelfth Sunday

First reading: The Persecuted Prophet (Jeremiah 20.10-13)

Jeremiah was the last prophet in Jerusalem before the Babylonians sacked the city and took most of the inhabitants into exile as slaves

in 586Bc. He was sent as a final warning, to tell them all, from the king downwards, that disaster was impending if they did not amend their ways and turn back to the Lord. The authorities didn't like it, and accused him of sabotaging the morale of the citizens. He was arrested and dumped in an empty water storage pit to keep him quiet. He himself was a gentle soul and hated delivering this fierce message, complaining to the Lord about his tough and unpalatable task, and the persecution he suffered. But he stuck to his guns, and when the king tore up the threatening message he sent, Jeremiah merely repeated it - with more besides. He also had a message of hope, that eventually the Lord would give them a new covenant, with a new heart and a new spirit, so that they would again be the People of God. This reading is chosen to show in the Old Testament the courage and perseverance in proclaiming the message that, in the gospels, Jesus asks from his disciples.

Question: When is it most difficult to take a stand and announce that I hold Christian principles? Do I manage to do this?

Second reading: Christ, the Second Adam (Romans 5.12-15)

Christ is the saviour, but how does he save? The Letter to the Romans is Paul's fullest explanation, and the heart of that teaching is that Christ is the Second Adam. Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, as described in Genesis, is not a simple historical story of one particular sin. It is the paradigm of all sin, the paradigm or analysis of all human failure, the process of turning away from God's commandments in pride and independence: 'I know better than God what is good for me.' We are children of Adam in so far as we have sinned, and Adam's sin sums up that of all humanity. At the same time, Adam is not only the type, but also the founder of all humanity. Christ, by way of contrast, is the second founder of all humanity. His act of perfect obedience to his Father on the cross transcends and heals this act of disobedience committed by the first Adam. Only Christ's act of loving obedience could be great enough to do this. It had to be an act of a man, but not of a mere man. We are members of this new humanity in so far as we join ourselves to Christ, put all our trust and hope in him.

Question: Can you see any similarity between the sin of Adam and our own sins?

Gospel: The Mission of the Apostles (Matthew 10.26-33)

This whole chapter of Matthew brings together and sums up what Jesus has to say to his apostles about declaring his teaching in the face of hostility and persecution. Jesus himself was fearless in proclaiming his message. He 'taught with authority', as the gospel constantly tells us. His disciples are sent out to do the same. We do not often meet with real persecution, although it may yet happen. The martyrs of communist Russia or Vietnam lived many years of peaceful Christianity before unexpectedly facing martyrdom. The monk martyrs of Algeria did not reckon on martyrdom when they went to Algeria. The only preparation for martyrdom can be fidelity and prayer. More often we face mockery for holding to Christian principles, and that too can be difficult to bear. We can be accused of narrow mindedness, lack of appreciation of human values, blind obedience, sentimentality, naivety, and a host of other hurtful slurs. Jesus did not promise that the Father would prevent the sparrows falling to the ground! Neither is it always easy to respond to such slurs with the patience and generosity as well as the truthfulness which Jesus would have shown. 'A spoonful of honey attracts more flies than a barrelful of vinegar', said St Francis de Sales.