

4th Sunday of Year--Cycle C  
(Jer 1:4-5,17-19; 1 Cor 12:12-13-13; Luke 4:21-30)

We are blessed with three extremely instructive readings today, readings which, taken together, teach a powerful lesson.

The first reading brings us the account of the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet. It starts out beautifully by speaking of God's plan for him before his birth:

"The word of the came to me thus:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

before you were born I dedicated you,

a prophet to the nations I appointed you”--

followed by words of assurance--"do not be afraid of them ..."

Now, I'm sure that a number of you recognize something is amiss here as the lectionary presents the text. Something is missing. It is hard to know why the lectionary would leave out several Jeremiah's response. Jeremiah tries to EXCUSE himself. He says: "Ah, Lord GOD. I do not know how to speak. I am too young!" Perhaps he had a point. Theirs was not a culture where any teenager could grab a bull horn to chastise his elders. A youngster without a beard had no standing. But the Lord will not accept the excuse. "Do not say, 'I am too young.' To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak," And then the Lord gives the assurances we read in the lectionary.

History tells us that Jeremiah did become a prophet, and he has the lumps to prove it. Jeremiah wasn't the only one who tried to evade the Lord's call by giving excuses. Moses is the parade example. When the Lord tells him from the burning bush on Mt. Sinai, "Now, go! I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Moses' excuse is, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh?" Like Jeremiah, he is saying, "I am a person of no standing. They won't listen to me." So the Lord provides some magic-like signs, such as turning his staff into a serpent. Moses' next excuse was that he doesn't know God's name (thinking God would not tell it to him), but God tells him, "I am who I am." "What does that mean?" Moses wants to know. "Say to them, "Yahweh, the God of your fathers has sent me to you." Yet another excuse, "I'm not eloquent, slow of speech and tongue," so God gives him Aaron as his mouthpiece. Having run out of excuses, Moses says, "Please send whomever you wish--but not me." Then the Lord became angry, and Moses had to submit.

Or try it on yourself. Suppose God should tell YOU, "Go stand in front of the White House and proclaim this word ...," would you pile into the old Volvo and head for Pennsylvania Avenue? or would it be, "Who am I that I should go?"

If we turn to today's gospel, the theme of "excuse" is still relevant. The first reading about the call of Jeremiah

prepares us for Jesus' word about a prophet without honor, applying it to Himself. As illustration, Jesus cited the cases of Elijah, who saved a Phoenician widow from starvation (though there were plenty of widows in Israel), and Elisha, who cleansed Naaman the Syrian from leprosy (though there were plenty of lepers in Israel). When Jesus reminded His Jewish audience at Nazareth of prophetic acts of mercy toward the hated foreigners, they were filled with fury and wanted to kill Him. The "excuse" for such homicidal their hatred was xenophobia. Obviously there was no excuse for wanting to kill Jesus. Sad to say, xenophobia is being fostered among us, in our day, with no better excuse. The xenophobia that is being peddled in our day is against peoples we have never had a quarrel with--the people of Mexico and other peoples of Central and South America. The "excuse" is in the claims, basically unsupported, of criminal elements among them--or even generalization of all as rapists, terrorists.

The use of Jeremiah's call narrative as an illustration of the "prophet without honor" was aptly chosen because no prophet was more without honor than Jeremiah. Treated as a traitor by the rulers, imprisoned, beaten and put into the stocks, thrown into an empty cistern to die, and stoned to death by his own people (according to Jewish tradition); scholars see him as a type of Christ and speak of his "Golgotha" and "via Crucis."

Our second reading from St. Paul also has a place in this study. Paul's words just before today's passage are, "If I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have

love, I am nothing." He goes on to speak of the wonders of love. Love is patient, kind, not jealous, not pompous, is not rude, does not seek its own interests ..." and on and on.

"Does not seek its own interests"--that is just the reverse of "me first," even more of "me only." Christian love certainly does not accord with the lack of simple humanity which separates children from their parents at the border, incarcerates people seeking asylum among us. We who claim to be Christian people should remember that "without love we are nothing," but rather poor excuses of what we should be.

Jesus, in His synagogue address, just before the part we read, had quoted this passage from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives ... to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Would we prefer to join Jesus in proclaiming glad tidings to the poor or join those who would build a wall to keep them out? Here is a good chance to ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?"