

THE EMMAUS SERIES

12th Sunday, Year A

Jeremiah 20: 10-13

Romans 5; 12-15

Matthew 10: 26-33

Do not be afraid

As we saw last week, the commission of the Twelve is addressed to all baptised Christians. Continuing his instruction, Jesus tells the apostles that all the 'hidden' truths that they have come to know, as his companions during his earthly life, must be 'proclaimed from the house tops'. The term 'proclaim' echoes the word 'kerygma' (proclamation) that came in the New Testament to stand for the message preached by the apostolic Church.

Jesus knows what the future holds for him, and he warns the apostles that they must be ready for the same fate. The word, 'martyr' means 'witness'. In the early centuries, the fact that so many men and women, young and old, were ready to face a terrible death, rather than renounce their faith, so impressed their pagan neighbours that it led many of them to embrace the Christian faith. Martyrdom has been a continuing fact of the Church's life during the past century. Most of us, however, will not have to face this ultimate test. All of us, in the other hand, will know times when it is not easy to stand up for the things of God.

The courageous example of Jeremiah can still inspire us as we face these difficulties. The messages of the prophets were not miraculous communications, but the reflections of believers who – because they had a living faith in the God of the covenant – recognised God's desires for the people in their changing circumstances. Prompted by the Spirit, they shared their convictions with God's people. Jeremiah lived in a nation in crisis - because of the invasion of a powerful enemy. His prophetic reflections were unwelcome in influential circles. Later developments showed that his fears for his life were justified. Turning to the Lord in his isolation - to the God who comes to the aid of the 'needy' - he echoes one of the great themes of Old Testament faith, 'the Lord hears the cry of the poor (those who have no one else to turn to).'

Now it is the Saviour himself who encourages those who must overcome their 'fear', as they give witness to all that he stands for. He translates the theme that gave courage to Jeremiah into terms that bring to mind the whole message of the Sermon on the Mount. Why should they fear? Even the cheapest life in the market 'two sparrows for a penny', is in the watchful care of their heavenly Father. 'Why every hair of your head is numbered', he tells them. In the end, when he comes to judge the world, he will 'declare himself for them in the presence of his Father'. Do not be afraid before the threats of the present world; make sure not to be found wanting, in the end.

Our essential Christian witness will not be given in the market place, but in the informal exchanges that are a constant part of life. – in the discussions that lead to family decisions, in our work place conversations, and in the attitudes that people know are the expression of Catholic conviction. It will not be so much what we say, as the respect and friendliness with which we express ourselves that matters. 'Always have your answer ready for the people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have', St Peter says, 'But give it with courtesy and respect, and with a clear conscience' (1 Pet 3:15).

John Thornhill sm