

13 Pentecost Yr C, 18/08/2013  
Jer 23:23-29; Lk 12:49-56  
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“Hard to hear messages”

You have most likely heard the old adage: “Don’t shoot the messenger.” The adage refers to those messengers who are bearers of bad news. You have also heard another old proverb: “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Of course Jesus had his own version of this proverb when he visited his hometown of Nazareth and they rejected him, he said: “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” (Lk 4:24)

Today, in both our first lesson and gospel we encounter hard to hear messages from the prophet Jeremiah and Jesus. Both Jeremiah and Jesus were frequent bearers of bad news. In several instances during the course of their preaching and teaching ministry Jeremiah and Jesus faced audiences who rejected both them and their message. Jeremiah and Jesus were not “people pleasers,” they did not win any popularity contests. Rather, they spoke God’s word of truth by “calling a spade a spade” and “let the chips fall where they may.”

And the chips did fall where they may—as both Jeremiah and Jesus suffered a great deal of rejection and persecution in their lives. Jeremiah and Jesus were all too often misunderstood, unappreciated, and dismissed as crazy, mad, insane, and yes, even regarded as enemies of God. All of this because they did not preach and teach messages that the people wanted to hear. Rather, their messages were hard to hear and accept, and I am sure, even harder for both Jeremiah and Jesus to proclaim. Who wants to be a bearer of bad news?! Who enjoys being rejected or judged by others as crazy, mad, insane?! No one! Yet, in both cases, Jeremiah and Jesus suffered such hardships for the sake of their people and in obedience to the LORD their God.

Anyone who has read and studied the book of Jeremiah will come to the conclusion, I think, that this prophet was not a happy camper. He was an angry and a lonely prophet. Even though he was called by God to be a prophet not only to his own people of Judah, but also to the nations; he wrestled with his call, and at times had wished that God had called someone else. In this regard, I think every preacher, if they're honest, will identify with Jeremiah, I know I do. Yet Jeremiah had one of the most vital, extremely engaging relationships with the LORD ever to be recorded in the Bible. In spite of all his arguing and resisting God, he remained faithful. He did as God asked him. Today's passage is one among many prophetic pronouncements that Jeremiah preached regarding false prophets and the consequences of following false prophets.

Jeremiah proclaims the LORD's word in the form of questions. The overall picture is kind of like a courtroom scene where God is both Judge and Prosecuting Lawyer. So powerful is the evidence stacked up against the false prophets and those who follow and believe their message; that they don't have a legal leg to stand on. They are guilty period. God's word proclaimed by Jeremiah confronts them, saying they are telling lies, their dreams are not based on a divine revelation—rather, they are based on their own selfish and deceitful ways, turning the people away from God.

Jeremiah ends the passage with a vivid picture in question form: "Is not my word like fire, says the LORD and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" The answer for Jeremiah and those who strive to be faithful to God is "Yes." Yes, God's word is like fire. A fire-word that brings judgement by revealing sins and declaring sinners guilty. On the other hand, a fire-word that purifies and cleanses, just like the fire that purifies precious metals of their impurities. Yes, God's word is also like a hammer that is firm and hard and breaks a rock in pieces. Jeremiah himself, in many respects, was broken into pieces in that the heavy weight on his soul to be faithful to God's call and to proclaim God's message brought much suffering and public humiliation. Yet, we are told elsewhere by the wise words of Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifice

acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." God has to break our proud and self-centred, sinful spirit to humble us and help us to realise how much we need God in our life, every day and in every circumstance.

In today's gospel Jesus, like Jeremiah is the bearer of bad news. Bad news, which taken seriously, also breaks us. Bad news we do not want to hear or accept. Yet it is true. Jesus tells us that he has come not to bring peace in the family; rather he has come to bring division. Listen to the following story, perhaps you or someone else in your family has gone through a similar experience.

Carla and Ben had been married for about 10 years when the door-to-door evangelists called. Ben was at work at the time, but Carla was home, and bored, and so she invited the pair in to have coffee and tell her about the Bible. They stayed for an hour, and when they left, Carla had a brand new Bible and a study book to go over, plus an agreement for the husband and wife team to come weekly to teach her about their brand of Christianity.

Ben really didn't care, and asked no questions. But he did become curious about the changes taking place in his house. Carla had quit smoking. When he came home, there were no more litanies about all the things the kids had done wrong all day. Oh, there was still a lot of chaos—a 3-and 5-year-old in the house don't lead to sparkling furniture and everything put away. But the house seemed calmer, and the children politer, and Ben was just amazed at it all. And glad, for a while.

But after a few months, when Carla didn't want to go to their favourite dance club because Ben tended to drink too much, and when she objected to the language Ben and his buddies used when they were hanging around on Saturday night, he began to get peeved with his wife "getting religion," as he put it. Carla was getting to be a real stick-in-the-mud, one of those people who didn't know what fun was anymore. He felt that her "prayer meetings" were the cause of the trouble, and tried to get her to quit going by scheduling

Sunday brunches with their old friends, or inviting the guys from work over for an evening of cards on choir night.

Things went downhill from there on. Carla never argued with him, but she refused to skip church. She and the kids would meet him after worship wherever he had wanted to go. Ben got angrier, and their fights became more frequent. His parents backed him up, making fun of Carla on the subject of religion at every opportunity. It was a long, drawn-out, painful divorce, which confused Carla, because she had been so sure that being a committed Christian was supposed to improve her marriage, not end it!<sup>1</sup>

Yes, Jesus did come to bring division even in your household and mine. You've likely seen or experienced it, and so have I—which reminds me of the following passage from C.S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*: I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish things that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, who Jesus Christ is to you may very well divide you from even your closest family members and friends. So, in following Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, we may very well be alienated from others in our family and neighbourhood. Yet, we will be included and valued in the family of God, the Church, and the kingdom of God; where we discover our true calling and live out our God-pleasing purpose. Why? Because of our baptism by the fire of Christ's death and resurrection, making us a new creation so that we are on his winning team. For that, thanks be to God.

1 *Emphasis: A Preaching Journal for the Parish Pastor*, Vol. 25, No. 2, July-August 1995, (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co., Inc.), p. 53.

2 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1952), pp. 54-56.