

“To You I Have Committed My Cause”

In the name of him who for us was delivered into the hands of sinful men and killed, dear friends in Christ: None of the men whom the Lord called to serve as prophets to his people Israel had it easy. All of them faced steady opposition which came in the form of ridicule, threats of violence, imprisonment, exile, physical abuse and beatings, and in some cases torture and death. Still, if the Lord were to say to me, “I want you to be one my Old Testament prophets, but I’m going to let you pick which one”, Jeremiah would probably be my last choice. The others all enjoyed some measure of success. That is to say when they proclaimed the Lord’s Word calling his people to repent and to turn from their idolatry and sin, and to place their trust in the Lord and in him alone, at least a few listened; at least some turned and were saved. But the Lord told Jeremiah from the get go that his would be a ministry of failure, that no one would listen to him, that the people of Judah and in particular of Jerusalem to whom he was called to warn of God’s impending judgment would pretty much to a man ignore him, resist him, oppose him, and secure in their sins be destroyed.

It wasn’t due to Jeremiah’s lack of trying. He took his call to be a prophet seriously. And he understood the power of God’s Word to crush hard hearts, and to instill the fear of the Lord in even the worst of sinners. He had the Word of Life – the Word that gives life to people dead in their sins – and he meant to proclaim it. What he didn’t bank on was the strength of the wicked to resist and to scorn the very Word of Life by which they might be saved.

When he encountered it, he was devastated. At one point in his ministry he tried to give up. He complained to the Lord, “Hey, I’m getting beat up here. Every time I preach your Word of repentance, they laugh at me. They shout me down. They shove me out. The other day they dropped me down into a slimy pit and left me there. I’ve had it. I’m not doing this anymore.” But then he found the Word that he had received from the Lord burned within him, compelling him to speak. God’s Word refused to be contained within him. Jeremiah found that he couldn’t not speak it. So he complained to the Lord about that too. “I’m damned if I do, and damned if I don’t. You’ve put me in an awfully tough place.”

So, what did he do? The only thing he could do. He ratcheted up the rhetoric. He spoke the Lord’s Word more forcefully. He tired even harder to get through to the calloused sinners and idolaters who were resisting him. So doing, he contributed a word to our English language. A *jeremiad* (derived from the prophet’s name) is a long, bitter critique of a society’s moral corruption and the unhappy fate the society will suffer as a result.

As you might imagine, the increased passion and urgency with which he delivered his message made Jeremiah even more unpopular with those who didn’t want to hear what he had to say. And it wasn’t just the people of Jerusalem who were angry with him. It turns out that the men of his hometown of Anathoth weren’t happy with him either. You see, in addition to being a prophet, Jeremiah was a priest. He belonged to one of the Levitical families descended from Aaron, Israel’s first high priest. As such, he served regular rotations at the Temple in Jerusalem. It happened as he was returning home from one such time of service, that the Lord warned him that the men of Anathoth had arranged a rather unpleasant welcome home party for him. They planned to ambush and murder him. The Lord told Jeremiah exactly what they were saying: “Let us destroy the tree with its fruit”; that is, let’s kill the man and his message. “Let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.”

Jeremiah knew that he had many enemies, but he didn’t expect that they included his closest family and friends. It wounded him deeply to know that the people he grew up with, with

whom he played games as a kid, with whom he shared many meals and happy memories – that they too had hardened their hearts against the Lord’s Word to the extent that they intended to silence him once and for all. That’s why he says, “I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter”. I didn’t see this coming, and I would have walked right into their trap had the Lord not made known to me their plot to destroy me.

It was the Lord’s will to keep Jeremiah alive, to continue to use him to preach repentance and true faith to the people of Judah and Jerusalem – even though they refused to hear. Such is the Lord’s mercy. He continues to extend it even to his fiercest foes. It’s like in the Parable of the Sower. The seed is cast with wild abandon even on the hard path where it cannot grow.

And there is some irony here. The men of Anathoth had planned to destroy Jeremiah and his message with him. They hoped to erase his name from human history. It worked out the other way around. Jeremiah lived. And his message lives on even today. The Word of the Lord endures forever. Even if you do manage to kill the messenger, you cannot silence the Lord’s message. And Jeremiah? We remember him. But I’ll bet you can’t name even one of the men involved in the plot to kill him. It’s they who were erased from human memory. Worse, they are blotted out of the Lamb’s Book of Life. They are forgotten by God himself.

Jeremiah, grieved by their betrayal of him, prayed that he might see the Lord’s vengeance upon them. I suspect that it’s a prayer he later regretted, for he did live to see the Lord’s judgment fall on not just the men of Anathoth who had conspired against him, but on the entire nation of Judah that continued to resist his message. That judgment came hot and heavy in the form of the Babylonian army that killed, sacked, and destroyed pretty much everything in their wake. The desolation of the land was total. To be sure, the Book of Lamentations is Jeremiah’s description of the extent of the devastation and his profound sorrow because of it. It reminds us to careful what we pray for.

More to the point, however, is that Jeremiah did not take this vengeance himself. He committed his cause to the Lord who judges righteously. And that is the main takeaway we want to derive from this short text. We have not been called to be the Lord’s prophet to a nation of rebels; but each one of us does have the Word of Life, the saving Gospel of Christ Jesus. And we have been called to bear witness to the people in our lives: our families, friends, neighbors. When we see any one of them straying into sin or unbelief, we have a sacred duty to warn them, to call them to repent and to return to the Lord. And no, that’s a message that might not be received well. But faith comes by hearing the Word of God. So the Word must be spoken. To grow, the seed must be cast – even if it falls on hard soil.

And if that hard soil resists to the point of offering insult and injury to you for having the care and love to speak it; well, that’s the price you pay; it’s the cross you carry. You commit your cause to the Lord, like Jeremiah did. Or better yet, like Jesus did. He too faced a plot to murder him because he spoke the truth of God’s Word. He knew it was coming too as we heard him say in today’s Gospel lesson. But unlike Jeremiah, he didn’t get to escape it. He went like a lamb to the slaughter. And he saw and felt the judgment of God fall on himself for all the world’s sins. Yet, when they lifted him up, he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for don’t know what they’re doing”. And in the end, he committed himself and his cause to the Lord.

May we who have received his grace and forgives for countless sins, take up whatever cross he may assign, and follow him through life, through death, unto life eternal, committing ourselves and our cause to the Lord. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!