

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Jul 28th 2014

Today's first reading must seem very strange. Dirty underwear, buried in the ground where it rots and is then dug up. Of what possible use could it be? No use at all, except as a graphic image of uselessness – of something held close by God but misused and ruined by those to whom its care was entrusted.

Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet. It was not a job he wanted, but he couldn't resist God's call. A prophet is not so much someone who sees the future, as a person who sees how God wants us humans to behave toward one another and toward the creation God has entrusted to our care. God chose Israel and gave it a vocation – precisely to be a model for the rest of the world. Israel didn't always measure up, and Jeremiah's job, like that of the other Old Testament prophets, was to call attention to Israel's failures. A prophet not only spoke God's vision for humanity, but embodied and enacted it by the prophet's life and actions. What does Jeremiah say to Judah? "You are of about as much use to God as rotted, dirty underwear." No mincing words there. His symbolic act becomes even more poignant when we hear God saying that Judah was as close to Him as a human is to his own underwear.

St. Paul tells us in several places that "all things written in times past were written for our instruction". That's certainly true for this graphic, earthy episode. The counterpart of Israel today as God's model people is, of course, Christianity. Our task, our vocation, is to show the world God's plan for humanity. How have we measured up? How well do we draw people to God's vision? Gandhi, you recall, said he would have been a Christian if he had encountered someone who actually lived the Beatitudes. Yes, there were virtuous Israelites in Jeremiah's time, and there certainly are virtuous Christians in our own time. But it's the people as a group, and their leaders, that Jeremiah is speaking about. How are we doing as a people? Sexual abuse of minors, discrimination, power grabbing, privilege-seeking, exclusiveness, money laundering, and that's just within the hierarchy. For the rest of us, it's too often rampant individualism, widespread social injustice, structural poverty, greed, and on and on . . . not all that different from Jeremiah's time. Maybe rotted, soiled underwear doesn't look like such an inappropriate metaphor after all.

Thanks be to God, we have now been given a prophet for our time, gentler than Jeremiah. Francis, Bishop of Rome, says that God's model people must be inclusive, must be forgiving, must be a poor church for the poor, must be joyful. And God says "listen to him". "Listen to him . . ."

God also says: "I love you and I will forgive you if you fail Me. But look: I have given you my Son. I have given you the Bible. I have given you the Sacraments. Live them all, be them all, and show the world my vision for humanity. If you don't, then, well, as Jeremiah said . . ."

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