

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Aug 4th 2014

The Church honors a French parish priest of the early 19th Century today in its liturgical cycle. St. John Vianney is one of very few diocesan priests who have been canonized. His early life was characterized by poverty and an impoverished education. He did not have adequate command of Latin to enter the seminary but by virtue of very hard and persistent work with a tutor (and assuredly God's grace) was able to gain enough Latin to enter seminary and complete studies in preparation for the priesthood. His ministry in the French country towns was initially met with indifference or scorn, but the same persistence in his prayer and gentle proclamation of the truth in the Sacrament of Reconciliation began to attract people from miles around to seek him out for spiritual help. He had a particular gift for assisting people to become open to God's grace and mercy, by recognizing the seriousness of their sins.

Today's readings, although they are drawn from the daily lectionary not the sanctoral lectionary, are particularly apt for appreciating the witness that John Vianney offers. In the first reading, Jeremiah, God's true prophet, who had been announcing the impending tragedies that were going to be visited on the Israelites, had gone about with the wooden yoke on his neck (in response to God's command) as a sort of visible symbol of what was about to fall on all the people through the wars and political oppression by the Babylonian Empire. His announcements of impending doom were not happily received - just as such warnings would not be happily received in today's culture - and Hananiah, a false prophet, strikes off Jeremiah's yoke and says that God has told him that Babylon would be defeated within two years before it defeated Israel. ("Don't worry, folks, its all going to go away - you don't have to believe that it is so bad as all that . . .").

God is not a happy with this false prophet who has allowed people to slip back into their indifference to social justice issues of that day (oppression of the poor, particularly widows and children who are caught up in violence and hunger) - which, surprise, surprise, are still the heart of the justice issues of our day nearly 2500 years later! God, in fact, tells Jeremiah to tell the false prophet that he will die shortly for his lies, and that a more terrible yoke is now going to fall on the neck of Israel because they have failed to heed the warning of God. The weight of solid iron as opposed to wood is meant to give a vivid sense of the heaviness of the Babylonian oppression that was coming as a consequence of their (the Israelites') sin.

Jeremiah and John Vianney were both men who heard and saw God's will and God's way with exceptional clarity. They banished the lies of the culture and revealed the truth about the consequences of sin. This is a great grace both for them, and for those they served, because they brought people to deep, interior freedom by awakening them from the fog of the lies that were voiced in their cultures leading people away from the mercy and forgiveness of God.

In the Gospel Jesus shows his followers how to manage the storms in the culture around them. We must keep our eyes on Jesus, no matter how hard the winds of “trends” blow about us. We must walk toward Jesus and his message of truth even if there is only swirling water under us.

Jeremiah kept his ears attuned to the true will of God, Peter witnesses how important it is to keep our eyes on Christ, and John Vianney labored to keep his heart engaged in the work of God’s merciful forgiveness – whatever distractions and discouragement tried to pull the three men away from their tasks of serving God’s reign.

I ask myself if I can do less in this day and time. Must I too hear Jesus chide me for being a woman of “little faith”? Or will Jeremiah warn me that “The LORD has not sent you, and you have raised false confidence in this people”? My own prayer this warm summer day will be that God will instruct me in the way of truth, and grant the gift of discernment when leading others. All of us who claim discipleship with Jesus must stay attuned to his call to get out of our boats of security and step into the waves of our culture to change the course of history to be more in line with God’s reign. From Pope Francis we hear the challenge to get into the streets and the messiness of our world so that we can proclaim God’s mercy. The Liturgy today gives us three great models for listening and acting.

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