

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Sep 30th 2015

Memorial of Saint Jerome, Priest and Doctor of the Church

Today is the memorial of Saint Jerome, whose translation of the Latin Vulgate Bible benefitted the Church for centuries. Sources also indicate that Jerome is remembered for his bad temper. Now there is a saint with whom I can identify! But of course, he had other redeeming qualities, including his dedication to truth and swiftness to express remorse and repentance. We can all do with more of these better qualities, even as we dial back the temper a little. (Admittedly, much is out there to upset us in these times.)

Today's readings begin with another praiseworthy fellow, Nehemiah, the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. Oddly, the king inquires about Nehemiah's interior life -- and Nehemiah answers honestly! When our friends ask us how we are doing, we sometimes might tell them about something that bothers us. When our boss asks, we are likely to feign a positive outlook and change the subject!

Nehemiah tells it like it is -- and boldly asks for the king's assistance in helping his people. Nehemiah was presumably doing fine in Persia, with a very responsible position. But he longed to return to his homeland. We all long for such a place, where our people can be found and where they can find us. For Nehemiah, this was a particular longing to rebuild this dignity of living among his own people, rather than in exile as an alien. Those longings can be heard in the Psalms. We can feel alienated living among those who do not share our commitments and customs, despite the kindnesses of outsiders like King Artaxerxes and his wife.

Today's gospel has always seemed hard to my ears. When one fellow volunteers to follow Jesus, Jesus dissuades him with a metaphor of difficulty -- can you follow one who lacks even a place to rest his head? That makes sense. I get it -- following this path will not be easy. But what about the other fellows? They feel the pull of these other commitments, which are also good, before they can act on Jesus' call. Jesus seems to dismiss their choices as inferior to answering his call, emphasizing the paramount obligation to follow when He asks. Similar words appear in other gospels, leaving little room for doubt about what Jesus intended.

Few of us face such stark choices in responding to Jesus' call in our lives. We follow Him while doing other good things, too, like caring for our families and making a living. We are multitaskers, it seems. But in our multitasking, we may need to pause and gain a sense in which we are really following Jesus, rather than being carried along, even by good things and duties.

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