

## Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jul 30th 2016

The way of the prophet is uncomfortable, indeed. Jeremiah speaks forth uneasy words that portend defeat for the people because of their disobedience. On account of these words, he stands accused by other prophets. The text does not reveal their message, but they may have had a happier, more upbeat tone. Perhaps something like “I’m OK, you’re OK, we are all doing fine.” But that is not Jeremiah’s message. (We get the term “jeremiad” from him. Merriam-Webster attributes this adaptation to the French.)

In those days prophets bearing uneasy words often suffered a grim fate. In this same chapter, another prophet named Uriah is killed by the king for speaking a similar message. Jeremiah escapes this fate because of his friend Ahikam. It is good to have such friends.

I admire Jeremiah’s resolve. He essentially tells his accusers, “Do as you will with me, but the truth I speak will endure.” He also offers hope, but that will require change from the people. This time, the people relent from trying to kill Jeremiah, but one wonders if his message set in. As with us today, the need for change is easier to identify than to execute. But identifying the need is a good start.

We need help to change. Like most humans, we tend to ask for help a little late in the process, when we are quite deep in the midst of trouble. Today’s Psalm reflects the cries of our hearts in deep distress. “Lord, in your great love, answer me.” It is a simple, beautiful prayer. Love and mercy are powerful catalysts for change. But are we ready to receive this kind of answer? God has a way of giving us unexpected answers, goodness when we expect penalties. His mercy is big -- really, really big -- when we call out to Him.

Those to whom the prophets are sent have their discomforts, too. Today’s gospel presents the familiar story of Herod’s execution of John the Baptist. Herod is of two minds about John. Herod would like to kill John to silence the message about his adulterous relationship with Herodias, who was his brother’s wife. But Herod fears the people who follow John may cause him trouble. He also seems to admire John, and he knows John is no ordinary fellow; “mighty powers are at work in him”.

Eventually another fear – the fear of losing face among his banquet guests – won out. We may think Herodias was clever, knowing how to manipulate her husband. But Herod may have been an easy mark. He was a man motivated by fear and the avoidance of discomfort; seeking and doing truth was not really his thing.

I can imagine the sadness of John’s friends as they quietly carried away John’s remains. The injustice of it all stings us. When they went to tell Jesus, I wonder what he said to them? I also think Herod also finds himself in deeper distress than before. He got what he wanted for a time, but the truth still cries out to him. And he must live with himself. So it is with us. Lord, help us to cry out to you for your mercy. And in your great love, answer me. Amen.