

"The Struggle for the Church"

29.Nov.09

1st Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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Chapters 32 & 33 of the Book of Jeremiah focus on several things, among them the promise and hope for restoration. First, however, let me put some paint on the canvas of this story.

The promise God speaks through Jeremiah addresses a dire situation...soon to be deadly! The armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon are advancing on Jerusalem. The city will soon be doomed, and the people know it (33:4-5). Jeremiah himself is currently imprisoned under the edict of King Zedekiah (33:1), which is curious given that Jeremiah was the king's counselor! It is surmised that what landed the prophet in prison were his many prophecies of judgment...now coming true. Yet on the edge of catastrophe, Jeremiah speaks God's words of promise and hope!

In the previous chapter we read that Jeremiah had just purchased a piece of land...a seemingly foolish thing to do given the approach of a potentially devastating invading army. Yet he bought this piece of property as a pledge of God's soon-to-be-revealed word, "For so says the God of Israel; Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32:15; *adpt, emphasis mine*). In the midst of impending doom a sign of hope.

Then, in Chapter 33 we again hear the words of hope. God speaks through the prophet offering the promise and hope of restoration, both of daily life and of the renewal of the line of King David, "...I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David..." (*from 33:15*). And so is the word of promise and hope as we begin the Church year and enter the Season of Advent; itself a Season of promise and hope.

Scripture encourages you and me to hold fast, even though many in today's world are experiencing what the people of Jeremiah's time

experienced, such as loss of job, loss of security, loss of family, loss of home; even loss of hope, or at the very least serious concern about the future. Who among us would question that today many nations and peoples are fearful of "invading armies" at their doorsteps—if not literally then figuratively? Each of us probably has some sort of "invading army" at our doorstep. This includes the Church; capital "C."

The words of hope and promise from God through Jeremiah are as powerful today as they were in Jeremiah's time—or should be. Why? Because the "righteous Branch out of the line of King David" is a foreshadow of Messiah. At this point, God's promise and hope for restoration is "signed, sealed...and soon to be delivered."

Just as you and I, personally, have struggles in our path so does the "church universal." By this I mean local churches, as well as Area, Regional, and National manifestations of Church. God's message through Jeremiah needs to be heard again by today's Church, which sits among some significant and perhaps too debilitating struggles! Let me offer a few, as I have come to see them.

First = The struggle of "knowing" or "feeling" something when it cannot be "seen." The Church wrestles with the idea that it is difficult to "know" something, or "feel" it, when we cannot "see" it. Let us be clear..."knowing" and "feeling" are two distinct things. When you know something, it stays in your mind. When you feel something, it goes into your heart. We cannot see God directly, of course. But we *can* "feel" God. The Church's struggle is with *feeling* God instead of our structures, processes, discernments, and politics. In Matthew we have these words of Jesus, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven" (*Mt. 7:21*). I submit this is much more a matter of the heart than of the mind.

Second = The struggle of always wanting to "re-think" Church. The Church spends so much time, money, and energy "re-thinking" what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ that it risks neglecting *being* that Church—doing, serving, helping, witnessing, and touching people directly. Is not Christ's command to DO UNTO OTHERS? I mean, how difficult is that to understand? I more and more ask

myself exactly what it is about this command that the Church needs to spend so much energy comprehending or "re-thinking" in order to *do!*

Third = The struggle with the disinterest in the Church. The Church struggles with so much of society (and, one might add, even many *Christians*) being so disinterested in the Church. Another word for that is apathy. We know we are no longer the "main game in town." More and more people grow dissatisfied with Church. One well-known writer I studied this week went so far as to say more and more people are "disgusted" with the Church. Ouch. Maybe one reason is because we often forget what Jesus said, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lamp stand..." (*Lk 11:33*).

Fourth = The struggle of repeating ineffective actions and habits. The Church needs to halt the actions, habits, processes, and behaviors that keep bringing it the same disappointing results. Are we becoming our own Trojan Horse?

Fifth = The struggle of the Church too often bowing to the culture. Now it would seem this would *not* be a struggle for the Church, but it is. One reads nearly weekly about the church "bowing" to society and culture. Have we forgotten that the Church's success is not dependent upon the response of culture? Yet we weary ourselves trying to "be responsive" to culture. I ask myself, "Where, pray tell, has that "bowing" gotten us?" Jesus Himself once said, "If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples..." (*from Jn 8:31*). To speak the obvious, He did not say, "If you continue in the culture's word..." Lest we forget, the Church is sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit, *not* the power and pleasure of the culture. How is it that the Church struggles so much with whether it wants *to be relevant to society or relevant to Christ?* Maybe the Church struggles too much with "chasing culture" rather than "chasing Christ"!

Perhaps we should recall the words of the Risen Christ to the church in Ephesus, found in Revelation 2. The church there received Christ's praise for its good works and its endurance. Then, however, Christ censures them, saying, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" (*Rev. 2:4a*). That "love" was for the word and will of God, and no thing or no one else but that.

Has today's 21st Century Church begun to "abandon its first love," as the church of Ephesus was accused by the Lord?

God's promise of hope, spoken through Jeremiah, was fulfilled in the person of Jesus...the Christ...whose Advent approaches.

Oh yes...one last struggle for the Church, if I may and while I am at it.

Sixth = The struggle of surrendering everything to Christ. The Church is called to be "a partner with Christ," not a "partner with itself." When it is a "partner with itself" then it becomes selfish, self-centered, internal oriented, and quite unwilling to risk partnerships with sister churches for mission and ministry—for doing!

"The days are surely coming...when I will fulfill the promise I made...at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David..." (*from 33:14-15*). That "righteous Branch"... the Messiah...has come, and will come again!

Regardless the struggle, our Hope is in the Advent of our Lord, and we need to be alert for it. (Invite everyone to read Mark 13:32-37.)