

## Fourth Sunday Ordinary time 2016

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17, 18-19 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13 Luke 4:21-30

One of the first native bishops in Nigeria returned to his native town for a reception soon after he was made bishop. His townspeople, most of whom had only a faint idea of what the Christian faith or the office of bishop stands for, came together to give him a big reception. In the welcome speech, the people expressed how happy they were that one of their own sons had risen to the exalted position of those who had direct access to God. They promised him they would all embrace Christianity if he, as bishop, would use the power of his office to suppress one of the Ten Commandments for them. Before they could say which of the Commandments they had in mind, the young bishop shocked them by telling them that the Ten Commandments are of divine and not human making, and so are unchangeable. The celebratory mood turned into disappointment and the bishop had to make a hasty departure from his own people. Jesus, in today's gospel, went through a very similar experience.

Like the bishop, Jesus was coming home soon after his baptism where the Holy Spirit descended on him and he was publicly declared to be the Son of God. Like the bishop, Jesus' townspeople received him at first with amazement and praise: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'" (Luke 4:22). Like the bishop, Jesus was expected to use his powers and do some special favour for his own people. After all, they were his own people. And again like the bishop, when Jesus told them the truth that God has no favourites but relates to all humankind by the same standards, they turned against him in disappointment and ran him out of town.

Jesus anticipated the people's disappointment with him because he understood himself to be engaged in the prophetic ministry. In biblical terms, a prophet is not simply someone who foretells the future. A prophet, essentially, is someone who speaks for God, God's own spokesperson. **The prophet's signature tune is, "Thus says the Lord...."** The prophet focuses primarily on clearly expressing the word of God. Whether this word is happily received by the people or not is not the prophet's primary concern. Prophets tell the bitter truth and this is what gets them into trouble.

How does all this apply to us? Jesus made the application himself. He said to his disciples: "If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. . . . **'No slave is greater than his master.'** If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." John 15:18, 20 Anyone who tries to lead a Christian life today knows how true this is.

Take young people in high school or college. It isn't long before some of them feel in their own lives the impact of what Jesus was talking about. Ask them what happens when they try to remain honest in an exam and others around them are cheating.

Ask them what happens when they try to remain chaste at a party and others around them are doing otherwise.

Ask them what happens when they speak out against abortion and others around them are defending it. Ask them what happens when they speak out against discrimination and others around them are assassinating the character of minorities.

And what's true of young people is also true of older ones. We've all experienced rejection and persecution for our faith at some time in our lives.

But we can't let this keep us from being honest or chaste. We can't let this keep us from defending the rights of the unborn or of minorities. And the reason is clear. Jesus said to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth. . You are the light of the world. . They [do not] light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand. . . . Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father." Matthew 5:13-16 Our vocation as Christians is to be prophets of the Father in our world, just as Jesus was a prophet of the Father in his world. This is what our baptism and confirmation were all about. To paraphrase the words of St. Paul: "In a world of darkness, we Christians are called by God to shine like stars." Philippians 2:15

The Greek philosopher Diogenes was regarded by many who knew him as a somewhat eccentric teacher, not least for his belief that virtue consisted in the avoidance of all physical pleasures, but that pain and inconvenience were conducive to goodness. Few people could accept either his teaching or his way of life. Diogenes was once noticed begging from a statue. When someone asked him the reason for this pointless conduct, he replied: "**I am exercising the art of being rejected.**" As Christians we need to practice this virtue of rejection.

**Let's close with a prayer that expresses the feelings of everyone who has ever tried to follow Jesus faithfully:** Lord, give us your love. For sometimes people reject us, and we are tempted to hate. Lord, give us your strength. For sometimes situations get tough, and we are tempted to give up. Lord, give us your courage. For sometimes pressure gets heavy, and we are tempted to give in. Lord, help us be like salt for everyone and a light for the whole world. Lord, in a world of darkness, help us shine like stars.