

## Pentecost 17 Homily

(September 19, 2010)

*Fr. Rylan notes that he does, at times, take liberties with the text while preaching, so this text may not be exactly the same as delivered.*

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As Jeremiah looked around the ancient city all he could see was the inevitable consequences of breaking faith with God. Nowhere was this more visible than in the idols of the people. Funny thing about idols – everyone thinks they refer only to objects but he knew that idolatry was actually about where human beings focus their heart - when it is over and above and in place of the God of heaven and earth, then it is idolatry.

And he saw a multitude of idols: Public people such as politicians, athletes, pop stars and magazine trend-setters. Buildings of all sorts of course, especially religious ones. There were even idols of concept and ideology: conservatism vs. liberalism, democracy vs. communism, freedom, theology, beauty and success.

Though the people possessed God's laws they only paid them liturgical lip service, passionate utterances being reserved for times of great anxiety. "There are no atheists in the trenches", sort of thing. This, he knew, was to misuse God's Word as a façade meant to appease the mind, tricking it into thinking everything was alright when it was not.

It revealed a people who thought it enough to be God's favoured ones. Their conviction that God would never leave them because they were his chosen people had blinded them to their own role in the present crisis. They failed to see that ignoring the need around them even though they had the resources to meet it and turning blind eyes to the corruption and injustice occurring on every street corner would result in their own condemnation.

When you start to believe that divine wrath is only for others, commandments are broken left, right and centre. "You shall not murder!" yet the front page of the newspaper reads: "HOMICIDE RATE DOUBLES IN LAST YEAR."

"You shall not steal!" alongside stories of muggings, insider trading and back door deals. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour!" but we constantly murmur and gossip behind others' backs. Jeremiah even observed, "They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth...."

“You shall not covet...” This one is almost too obvious. We have all coveted something from someone some time. We have all enviously eyed that new “toy” the neighbour bought, the body he has, the job she has, the life they have.

It seemed to be only Jeremiah who realized that the present desolation was not random; neither was it unexpected. He had tried to warn the people. He had tried to tell them that God’s choosing them and giving them the law was not enough, that they had to take an active role in the relationship. They were responsible, before God, for the lives they lived and the consequences that resulted. Every human has to eventually account for his or her actions.

Following God means choosing, each moment, to follow the good and righteous path that God has revealed. It is not enough just to possess knowledge of God’s will. He desires that it sink deep into the heart where it can become second nature, influencing how one interacts with the world around.

But they wouldn’t listen to Jeremiah’s pleading. They had made an idol even out of heaven. They trusted so much that God would never abandon them that they abandoned God and now the holy city was in ruins, its people carried off into exile to Babylon.

As he wandered about the lonely streets, the harsh realization of this judgment echoed off the broken walls, “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her...? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved!” “Is there no balm? Is there no healing ointment to soothe our sores and ease our suffering, even in Gilead which is ripe with healing oils? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?”

Is the Lord really not in Zion? Did he actually turn his back on his people? Yes...in a sense. God abandoned them to their destructive ways. He allowed the consequences of their actions to unfold, but he has not left them as such. He did so for their own good. A little later in chapter nine the Lord says to Jeremiah, “I will now refine and test them, for what else can I do with my sinful people?”

God’s loving presence is at work in even in his judgment, serving to purge and refine his people. He is present even when the floods have fallen and the destruction seems absolute. This makes all the difference between hope and despair. God’s judgment, though it might feel so, is not random or uncalled for.

How could it be otherwise for a God who sheds great tears for the sinful humanity he so dearly loves? And who cries out in the words of his prophet: “For the hurt of my people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me...O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a

fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!"

The tears of God –the same shed by Jesus – reveal a God in whom compassion, mercy, judgment and punishment embrace. He doesn't coddle us yet neither is he an absentee landlord sitting far out of reach from the world, waiting and watching to see what will happen.

The God of Israel, the God of the Church, cares enough about the creation brought forth from by his voice that he personally became subject to the corruption of his people in Jesus Christ. Truly subject to the ultimate abandonment of his Father he restored and renewed, planted and built, cleansed and reconciled.

Jeremiah keenly felt the pain of his people despite their arrogance. In the midst of their suffering he empathized with them. As tempted as he might have been to say, "I told you so!" Jeremiah instead cries out to God on their behalf. I suspect he was able to do so solely because his trust in God's goodness outweighed his despair.

He believed that the Lord was bringing about something new- even if he had to do it by such means as the destruction of Jerusalem. This new thing was nothing less than a new world; a new order in which justice and mercy flow like a waterfall from the throne of grace. It is a world that is being born out of the labour pains of the present age and God's people are being refined and shaped into its citizens.

And though the pains are sharp at times and a sense of abandonment threatens to overwhelm us, the prophet Jeremiah's proclamation rings all the louder, "Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar-the Lord of hosts is his name: If this fixed order were ever to cease from my presence, says the Lord, then also the offspring of Israel would cease to be a nation before me forever.

Thus says the Lord: If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will reject all the offspring of Israel because of all they have done, says the Lord."

Jeremiah knew the heavens could not be measured nor the fixed order cease. God would always turn again to his people even when his anger burned the Lord's mercy burned brighter. Amen.