

[Readings: Jer. 1:4-5, 17-19; Ps 71; 1 Cor. 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30]

Jeremiah was perhaps the most melancholy and persecuted of all the great Old Testament prophets. His was a sad existence, being labeled a trouble-maker, a liberal and even insane by his detractors. Yet our First Reading is message of hope. No matter how big the enemy is, no matter how hard the battle will be; if we are doing what is right and true, God will be with us to defend us, to support us, and to help us win the good fight. The job description of the prophet and for us, isn't promising: Everyone is going to fight you, and indeed at some point we might throw in the towel and tell God it's all too much. The promise of God, though, is to be with us through all our trials. When we face a difficult but necessary task, remember that God has our back, too.

In today's Second Reading, St. Paul writes his beautiful poem about love in the most disgusting of circumstances. He has been beaten to an inch of his life, and now he sits chained to a prison wall, in a dark and moldy prison cell, probably with rats and other non-human guests scurrying across the floor in front of him. There is no peace in the new church he founded in Corinth. The people there are arguing with each other over who belongs to the most faithful community and who is the greatest leader among them. They are debating about what Jewish laws should be kept and which should be broken. They are even discussing what political influence the young churches should have.

St. Paul, weary from his persecution and weary from hearing such bad news, writes a poem about love which is so inspiring and so long-lasting that most engaged couples choose this passage for their wedding ceremony in the Catholic and other Christian communities. From the suffering and death of imprisonment comes the Resurrection and new life of genuine Christian love. From the suffering and death of his prison cell comes Resurrection and new life in the gift of love. Why would St. Paul put love ahead of faith and hope? A wise priest-mentor had the simple answer. He told me, because when you die, your faith and hope are no longer necessary. You don't need to believe in God, because God will be right in front of you.

You don't have to hope in God, because God will judge you right then for how you lived your life on earth. Only the love you shared in this world will accompany you in the next. That's what Patrick Swayze tells Demi Moore in the final scene of the movie "Ghost." "All the love inside of you... You take it with you." That's one statement of faith and morals that Hollywood got right!

The cure to all the noise around us of hate, bigotry, prejudice, injustice and anger, Saint Paul tells us, is more and ever-increasing love. Love till it hurts, love while it hurts, and love after it hurts. That's what Jesus did, even as His own friends and neighbors tried to throw Him off a cliff! Love, mind you, is not silly or foolish. It does not stay in harm's way, in an abusive relationship, or embrace injustice for the sake of love. It struggles always to live in truth and with integrity.

So how do we put Paul's word to work today? Start by thinking of one hurt you've endured at work or home recently, and ask yourself whether you responded in love. In other words, were you patient, kind, and not quick-tempered or brooding? If you can answer yes, then congratulations, you have found a most excellent way to love. And to live.

Finally, we have today's Gospel. The home town of Jesus is divided in two. Half the people believe the words of Jesus and accept the fact that He needs to bring the Good News beyond familiar borders. The other the other half of the village of His home town didn't want Him to leave them.

I remember after my ordination, during my first year of priesthood I returned to my home parish in Detroit for a few special functions and events. Each time, I would hear these people who called me to priesthood, who supported my vocation and who encouraged me in the seminary say to me, "Fr. Nick, wouldn't it be great for you to come back here as our pastor?" My answer was always the same: "Not for all the tea in China!" You see, I knew everything about the parish -- the good, the bad and ugly. What was worse, is that they knew the good, the bad and the ugly about ME, and that would make things difficult and affect my credibility and effectiveness as a pastor!

What does Jesus do when He is confronted with the same dilemma and with an explosive crowd? Does He take up a weapon to defend Himself? Does

He go running to His Blessed Mother to hide behind her? No. Jesus passes right through the midst of them and goes away, to others who will listen with open minds and open hearts. He faces His challenge head on. He realizes that His suffering, death and rising more than likely will be a daily cross, and that this more than likely will be a daily comfort to sustain and strengthen Him.

Where are you and I in this faith picture? Is there a major battle ahead of us? Is there division in our community or in our family? Or are the very challenges of life itself the same daily cross Jesus encountered and which we now encounter? Ultimately, it will be the love that we share with others which will help us, as Archbishop Vigneron says, "share Christ in and through the Church." To "Unleash the Gospel" in the world around us, in our homes and in our parish.

One way this is being done is by a group of dedicated parishioners who make up our Stephen Ministry. Back in 1985, St. Martin de Porres Parish had the distinction of being the first parish in the Archdiocese of Detroit to bring the Stephen Ministry into our parish. It is a ministry of support and encouragement for our parishioners during times of difficulty and loneliness. They join us this weekend to renew their commission, and to ask us to re-commit ourselves to supporting them.

This is also Boy Scout Sunday. We honor and celebrate the boys and young adults who stand for all that is good in our country. To live lives of virtue. To learn to appreciate what is good, true and beautiful. To be of service to others.

We offer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick at the end of this weekend's Saturday 5:00 Mass to those who give witness to their faith, their hope and their love of the Lord through the cross of physical, mental, or spiritual crosses which they do not carry alone, but bear with the Lord Jesus Christ. He reminds us "For I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." AMEN!