

[Readings: Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalm 63; Romans 12:1-2; Matt 16:21-27]

There was a popular song several years ago, called, "Bad Day" by Daniel Powter. Some of its words are: " 'Cause you had a bad day, you're taking one down, you sing a sad song just to turn it around..."

If you think YOUR life is a "Bad Day," full of pain and struggle, look at the life of the prophet Jeremiah. Look at the life of St. Paul. Look at the life of Jesus!

Jeremiah faces devastating challenges in his prophetic ministry, summarized in today's First Reading. Of all the major prophets of the Old Testament, Jeremiah has suffered the most physically, spiritually and emotionally. His message falls on either deaf ears or rebellious ears. He has been assaulted physically and verbally so many times, it's hard to keep count.

He has now reached a point in his ministry when he says, "Enough! I give up!" His words which we hear today come from a despairing soul in prison. He has lost any of his worldly power, influence and wealth. He has nothing.

And in that dark despair he says, with wistfulness, maybe some anger, but also with a tender love: "You duped me, and I let myself be duped!" How many of us have fallen under the spell of love in a romantic relationship, in the depth of a close friendship, in the fellowship of fellow believers? We are "duped!"

We say things like, "You had me at 'Hello!'" "I'm so glad to have you as a friend." "Thank you for nurturing my faith-life." "I couldn't have done this without you." That's what Jeremiah says to the Lord. "I couldn't stop from witnessing to Your truth, O Lord, or to Your message of faith, hope and love, even if I wanted to. When I say, 'I'm going to be quiet in this situation. I will not speak up,' Your Word sets my heart on fire. I can't hold it in! I cannot endure that!" Wow!

Jeremiah's words probably express the feelings that many people of faith have at some point in their lives. He has run up against the prophet's lot: The faith in his heart he could not ignore, and the need to speak out from his faith, have led him to suffering and rejection. He feels "duped" and "seduced" because he feels God led him on only to seemingly abandon him. And even now he cannot rid himself of God's name, even though it has caused him torment.

You might not share Jeremiah's anguish in quite the same way, but you also may feel inner conflicts nonetheless. Can you want to believe but also have significant doubts? Yes, you can.

Has faith led you and me to take risks that now seem too risky or to make sacrifices that now seem too large? Have you ever felt "duped" by God? You betcha! Every time I read these words, I get a little "verklemt" because I hear Jeremiah saying these words with intimate love and not with disdain.

Have YOU been able to examine that feeling more closely and come to a deeper understanding of your life's purpose? I have come to know my identity and my mission very clearly, and it's to be a priest and to be here with you as your pastor! To give you my blood, sweat and tears... Mostly sweat!

Have you ever sensed that a decision or commitment you made for the sake of the Gospel would bring you hardship or suffering, as Jesus predicted it would for Him? How have you been compensated for your sacrifices?

St. Paul, no slouch to suffering himself, says pretty much the same thing in our Second Reading. Look at HIS track record: arrested, beaten, stoned, in prison, shipwrecked at least three times, and rejected. And yet he has the divine audacity to speak of the "mercies of God" and to tell those listening to his letter to offer what they do in this life as a living sacrifice. Go to work! Go to school! Go and shop! But let your every act be a statement of faith. Preach with the words of the way you live, beginning with respecting your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit!

My friends, this world doesn't have a clue as to how to live. Don't give into it or be seduced by it. Don't be "duped!"

Have a successful career, yes, but gain it ethically and morally.

Make money, yes, but remember where that money came from, and return to the Lord and to the human family a generous and grateful portion of that financial blessing, with a humble and grateful heart.

Accept the authority and power that have been given to you, yes, but let it reflect the Divine Authority and Power that guides your lives. Listen to the divine authority and power that comes from the Church.

This world sings, "I haven't got time for the pain." Jesus Christ says, "Take up your cross and follow in the way I walked."

The world teaches, "Look out for Number One – YOU!" Jesus Christ says, "Deny yourself and follow me."

The world says, "Turn over an obscenely big profit!" Jesus Christ says, "What does it profit you to gain the whole world at the cost of your immortal soul?"

How radical and counter-cultural is THAT! Those words are 2000 years old and STILL timely!

Students and teachers are returning to school for another program year. I challenge every student of studies and every student of life, and every teacher listening to me to make THIS Priority Number One: the search for truth. Religion and science are not in opposition to each other. The truth is the truth, and both religion and science can and do teach each other. Who is God creating me and calling me to be?

Priority Number Two: Never back down from the truth. Search for it, find it, and embrace it.

Priority Number Three: Share it! At home, at work, in school, and yes, even in the church parking lot! Let God's truth renew your minds, that you may discern what is of God, what is "good and pleasing and perfect!" AMEN!