

Homily for 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time
July 21 – 22, 2018

The True Zedekiah

God chose him from the womb, he tells us in the opening verses of the book that bears his name. His was God's voice - that repeatedly fell on deaf ears. When he spoke people tuned him out or turned him off. At times he felt like God had set him up for failure and so he cries out:

***O LORD, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;
you are stronger than I,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
every one mocks me.¹***

But two verses later he affirms:

***If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot²***

Jeremiah experienced deep anguish of soul because he saw so clearly the corruption occurring in his day. The religious and therefore social and political life in Judah was in disarray. And so he could not stop from speaking. There was a fire in his belly igniting his soul to diagnose clearly the spiritual disease that had become cancerous in his people. Those people who had been entrusted with the word of God were telling lies to the people and their county men were applauding them. They were like children whose parents continued to feed them on junk food and candy – they gobbled it up thinking how great it all was. As a result, they were not being nurtured with God's word and were spiritually malnourished.

In the passage from the 23rd chapter of Jeremiah we are given insight into the heart of the problem and the cure Jeremiah envisions.

***Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ²
Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my***

¹ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition., Je 20:7). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

² *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition., Je 20:9). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD.³

Within a Jewish understanding shepherds included both the religious and political leadership. These leaders were so negligent towards the people that the nation was being scattered. The spiritual and political leaders had become so self-serving and dismissive of God.

Such an attitude was represented by the man who was king at this time. His name was Zedekiah, a name meaning “The Lord is righteous” Yet Zedekiah and those who were to shepherd with him were anything but righteous. Just as their words were anything but godly.

Even though the present state of spiritual affairs is desperate, God, through Jeremiah, next speaks words of hope:

Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.⁴

What is at play in these verses is the coming together of those who were once scattered. The ingathering will be marked by shepherds whose care for their people is genuine and sincere. What a contrast from the present situation in Jerusalem. A community characterized by unity and health, security and trust. But it doesn’t end here. The news gets even better:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”⁵

Remember Zedekiah was a counterfeit king because he was not true to his name: “The Lord is righteous.” Here Jeremiah looks forward to the true Zedekiah, the king who will be truly righteous. The king who will reign and deal wisely with the people so that there can be genuine belonging and true godliness, a righteousness expressed in the people’s lives.

Jeremiah anticipates vividly the priesthood fully developed in the Church. In the Catechism we read:

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Je 23:1–2). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Je 23:3–4). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Je 23:5–6). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Christ has made of his Church a “kingdom of priests,” and gives the faithful a share in his priesthood through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation⁶

The common priesthood includes all baptized and confirmed Catholics. As such, the people of God share in the priestly reign of Jesus described so clearly by Jeremiah. Such a sharing in this priestly vocation calls all of the Catholic faithful to tend caringly those people entrusted to them. To be husbands and wives, parents, brothers, sisters, friends and work colleagues who words and actions help to gather people together rather than to scatter them. By doing so your lives will embody that Jesus is your righteous king and you as you live caring and compassionate lives.

The Catechism goes on to then describe the ministerial priesthood:

The ministerial priesthood received in the Sacrament of Holy Orders differs in essence from this common priesthood of all the faithful. It has as its purpose to serve the priesthood of all the faithful by building up and guiding the Church in the name of Christ, who is Head of the Body⁷

Jesus is of course the true king – the righteous shepherd whose will is to gather together all people into his catholic and universal church. But in order for the Church to be the community that gathers, rather than one that scatters, it means that her priests must be men who truly care for God’s people.

We are to serve the priesthood of all the faithful.

When there is not this kind of true pastoral care the Church experiences the same kind of dissolution experienced in Jeremiah’s day. However when priests are attentive to what it means to share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ then the kind of community represented in today’s gospel can find concrete expression. It is a community known as a place where people can experience they are truly cared for and it is a place where both spiritual rest and compassion are genuinely experienced. It is also a place where the teaching of Jesus is expressed in ways that draw people closer to the heart of God.

If Jeremiah was able to be here in person today, I think he would say to us, “Be aware of self-serving and sterile religion. All too easily the Church can become a place where people are driven away rather than brought together because of indifference, selfishness and pastoral malpractice. But when authentic faith is lived out, when spiritual fathers and their congregational families live compassionately, sacrificially and with a desire to deepen their understanding of, and living the faith, then the true King Zedekiah, Jesus, will shepherd priests in the common and ministerial priesthoods, so that we can ever more become a people after God’s own heart.

⁶ Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed., p. 895). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

⁷ Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed., p. 895). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

A heart of true compassion, and authentic teaching. A place of deep unity and familial spirit where the God, who is our Righteousness, is loved and honoured and his people treated with the utmost dignity.