

Five months after preaching at the funeral of his martyred friend Rutilio Grande, and less than three years before his own assassination, Archbishop (now St) Oscar Romero spoke thus of the prophet Jeremiah: "You heard today in the first reading the accusations: 'Death to that Jeremiah! He's demoralising the soldiers and all of the people . . .' See how the accusations against the prophets of all times are the same. When the prophet bothers the consciences of the selfish, or of those who are not building with God's plans, he is a nuisance and must be eliminated, murdered, thrown into a pit, persecuted, not allowed to speak the word that annoys".

Both Grande and Romero followed in the footsteps of Jeremiah. Both took Jesus' words to heart. They refused to succumb to fear. They declared themselves for Christ before the might of earthly powers. Both paid the price.

## A reading from the prophet Jeremiah

20:10-13

Jeremiah said:

I hear so many disparaging me,  
' "Terror from every side!"  
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!  
All those who used to be my friends  
watched for my downfall,  
'Perhaps he will be seduced into error.  
Then we will master him and take our revenge!  
But the Lord is at my side, a mighty hero;  
my opponents will stumble, mastered,  
confounded by their failure;  
everlasting, unforgettable disgrace will be theirs.  
But you, Lord of Hosts, you who probe with justice,  
who scrutinise the loins and heart,  
let me see the vengeance you will take on them,  
for I have committed my cause to you.  
Sing to the Lord,  
praise the Lord,  
for he has delivered the soul of the needy  
from the hands of evil men.

## Responsorial Psalm

Ps 68:8-10, 14, 17, 33-35

R. Lord, in your great love, answer me.

It is for you that I suffer taunts,  
that shame covers my face,  
that I have become a stranger to my brothers,  
an alien to my own mother's sons.  
I burn with zeal for your house  
and taunts against you fall on me. R.

This is my prayer to you,  
my prayer for your favour.  
In your great love, answer me, O God,  
with your help that never fails:  
Lord, answer, for your love is kind;  
in your compassion, turn towards me. R.

The poor when they see it will be glad  
and God-seeking hearts will revive;  
for the Lord listens to the needs  
and does not spurn servants in their chains.  
Let the heavens and the earth give him praise,  
the sea and all its living creatures. R.

## First Reading

Today's reading is an excerpt from the last of Jeremiah's several laments (also known as confessions or complaints). As it stands, it gives the false impression that Jeremiah's only problem is the enemies he has around him and that God is his salvation. The truth is more complex. In the preceding verses that we don't hear until later in the year, Jeremiah angrily accuses God of seducing him into prophecy, and in verses that follow he curses the day he was born. Nonetheless we can't mistake the depth and strength of Jeremiah's feelings. In the first part of the reading he repeats the verbal charges his opponents assail him with. They're the slogans of mob fury. We are under no illusions about the hostility he's facing. From there, however, we are led by the prophet to share his confidence in the saving power of God. The mood swing is immense. The seething turmoil of Jeremiah's distress yields first to a declaration of faith in the Lord, then to a prayer for vengeance, and finally to a chant of praise.

This is a powerful text, charged with intense emotion. Readers have a challenge on their hands in the first section where Jeremiah's voice alternates between lamenting his predicament and citing his accusers' jibes. The assembly should clearly hear and be able to distinguish between the depth of his distress and the anger of his enemies. A moment's pause will allow for significant change of tone when Jeremiah begins to confess his faith in God, then progresses to prayer and praise.

## Responsorial Psalm

Although neither the first reading nor the responsorial psalm is used in Holy Week, each would be at home there. Both give voice to the cry of an innocent servant of God suffering hostile attacks and rejection. In fact Psalm 68/69 is cited by a number of New Testament writers in reference to Jesus' passion and death. Verses from different parts of the psalm have been selected and combined to form the responsorial psalm. The response comes from about half-way through. To the reader's advantage, the mood has been well and truly set by the first reading. Jeremiah's journey from distress to trust is plainly echoed in the first two stanzas of the psalm. And just as he is moved to draw others into praise of God, so in the third and final stanza the attention of the psalmist shifts away from his personal predicament to that of the poor and needy.

The reader's task is to enable the assembly to share in the psalmist's progress from crying out in anguish through trustful pleading to confessing faith and praise. In addition to the challenge of conveying these changes of mood, the reader will need to take care with the longer, six-line, stanzas. A rising inflection at the end of the fourth line should alert the assembly to the fact that there's more to come.

## A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 5:12-15

Sin entered the world through one man, and through sin death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned. Sin existed in the world long before the Law was given. There was no law and so no one could be accused of the sin of 'law-breaking', yet death reigned over all from Adam to Moses, even though their sin, unlike that of Adam, was not a matter of breaking a law.

Adam prefigured the One to come, but the gift itself considerably outweighed the fall. If it is certain that through one man's fall so many died, it is even more certain that divine grace, coming through the one man, Jesus Christ, came to so many as an abundant free gift.

## A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

10:26-33

Jesus instructed the Twelve as follows: 'Do not be afraid. For everything that is now covered will be uncovered, and everything now hidden will be made clear. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the daylight; what you hear in whispers, proclaim from the rooftops.

'Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; fear him rather who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Can you not buy two sparrows for a penny? And yet not one falls to the ground without your Father knowing. Why, every hair on your head has been counted. So there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows.

'So if anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven. But the one who disowns me in the presence of men, I will disown in the presence of my Father in heaven.'

## Second Reading

Today's passage from Romans (part of the longer text we heard on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent) flows on immediately after last week's reading. That ended on a joyful note by affirming the reconciliation with God that the faithful already enjoy through Christ.

This prompts Paul to embark on a comparison between Christ and Adam (both a personal name and a word meaning "man" in general). Adam sinned, as did everyone after him, bringing death and condemnation to all. Christ obeyed, bringing divine grace "to so many as an abundant free gift". It's an *a fortiori* argument to illustrate how much greater and more beneficial for everyone the consequences of Christ's action are in comparison with Adam's.

It's not an easy argument for contemporary listeners to follow. The issues that it raises about sin, death, law and grace have been debated at length by theologians ever since. Readers are not charged with the task of explaining this text, but of delivering it with as much clarity as possible. They'll do this if they work their way patiently through the thicket of Paul's thought, giving each of his propositions due weight and proclaiming his conclusion with faith-filled conviction.

## Gospel

Today's reading is the second of three excerpts from Jesus' missionary instructions to the apostles that we hear on succeeding Sundays. Unlike the specific directives that precede this passage but are passed over in the lectionary, Jesus' advice here is more general and proverbial. It also looks beyond the immediate circumstances of the apostles' mission to that of the Church in the post-resurrection era.

Punctuating the lesson like a refrain is Jesus' three-fold exhortation to the apostles not to be afraid. Even as he offers this encouragement, he alludes to the danger they may face from "those who kill the body". Freedom from fear is not based on the absence of opposition but on God's providential care.

All the same there are two disconcerting notes in what Jesus has to say. The first is his warning that they should fear the one "who can destroy both body and soul in hell". The second is the threat of being disowned before God if they disown Christ on earth. Some might find here a hint of the last judgement as it is envisaged in the parable of the sheep and the goats much later in the gospel. In sum, this collection of sayings is as bracing as it is comforting.