

There is a painting of the prophet Jeremiah by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. He looks pretty much like he sounds in today's first reading, miserable, frustrated and fed up. In his day which was almost two and a half thousand years ago he found plenty to complain about. He accused God's people of chasing after worthless things and becoming worthless themselves, of wasting the good things God provided for humanity. He talked up a storm of such misery that for the following centuries his name would be and indeed still is associated with undiluted pessimism. If as some have suggested the world is divided into two types of people- radiators and drains then Jeremiah was one monumental drain. His world was four hundred years before Christ yet Jeremiah could probably walk right into any radio or TV studio today in many parts of the world and be right at home in the bitter complaint ridden secular and religious discussions of the moment. He would not be short of things to rail against.

The peace and prosperity we yearn for seem still to be all too vulnerable to undercurrents of manmade instability. Even the great God given gifts of clean air, unpolluted seas and rivers, mighty forests that help us breathe, meadows to grow our food, have been robbed of their goodness through human selfishness and stupidity. So many of the world's children each made in God's image and likeness, each one loved by God and conferred with God given dignity and equality are oppressed by man-made prejudice, exploitation, oppression and violence, their lives and potential destined to be willfully wasted by powerful forces ranged against them. Yes Jeremiah would surely find plenty to weep over in our messed up time. He would be entitled to one big sigh of -I told you so... For us there is little comfort in the realization that the human capacity for creating avoidable chaos has a long and enduring history, of repetition of past ghastly mistakes, of failing to leave well enough alone. Jeremiah's problem if he appeared today would not be that of being a lone voice in the wilderness but rather being one of many voices raining down prognostications upon us. Our problem is to know who to listen to, who to follow, who to turn to for guidance as we try to navigate a pathway through the tough preoccupations of our own life and times?

Today's other readings try to give us answers to bring home with us from this gathering, to fill us with courage and hope enough to dispel the despair of the prophets of doom. Sometimes we need to be reminded as Hebrews tells us that in the midst of much messiness....

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever....

That is an important reminder but there is more, for having Christ in our lives and at our side is not a recipe or excuse for standing still, for doing nothing

to help turn the tide of human misery which affects so many. We have work to do.

Hebrews tells us- let the love continue- offer hospitality to the stranger, remember those who are in prison, those who are being tortured....Do not neglect to do good... share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

It's a message rammed home even more pointedly in Luke's Gospel. Those who exalt themselves shall be humbled those who humble themselves shall be exalted. Christ take aim at our pretensions, at the gravitational pull of our egos and our selfish vanity. He understands their capacity to overwhelm our thinking and our acting, their capacity to obliterate the empathy for the other which he tells us is the hallmark of the true Christian. He reminds us that Christians believe this life is a journey to an important destination after death. How we behave on that journey will have consequences not alone here on earth but at the resurrection of the righteous. It has become unfashionable perhaps to contemplate that we might face a personal balance sheet. Whether or not we can bring ourselves to believe in a day of reckoning to come the evidence is in that the world is graced and blessed not by the illusory success of loud bullies and braggarts but by those who quietly commit to lives of service to the poor, the excluded, the disabled, the overlooked.

A few weeks ago I spoke at the memorial service here in Dublin for Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche community. On the wall there was a large photograph of Jean at 90 years of age with death already knocking at his door. It was the antithesis of Michelangelo's elderly miserable Jeremiah. This was the picture of a deeply, deeply happy man. A man whose name makes people smile. If ever proof was needed of the blessings that come from inviting into your life the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, that proof was in Jean's smile and the smiles of those who came that day to celebrate his life. We ended up not crying but dancing.

Jean was so phenomenally talented he could have been always at the top table, always among the celebrities, the A-list movers and shakers on life's fast lanes. Instead he chose to befriend those who were often forced off the road onto the hard shoulder, left to be spectators at life rather than fulfilled participants. He opened his home and heart to those with intellectual disability and so authentic was his love it created a worldwide movement of loving care for the stranger.

Over generations we Christians have to our shame excluded many groups, many individuals, consigning them to wasted lives, to life in the half-light. In

the process we have often diluted the credibility of the gospel of good news, and robbed our brothers and sisters of trust in a loving, living God. We have been flattered to know we are the work of God's hands but careless in accepting that we are also the hands of his work. If the good news is to triumph in the face of so much fake news, false prophets and fair weather friends then we who claim to be followers of Christ need to heed today's prophets, like Jean who simply did what today's Gospel asks of us, what Hebrews asks of us. He made friends with the overlooked children of God. He accepted each person as they were. He did not second guess God. Through his simple witness he inspired thousands to redirect their lives and in so doing softened hearts hardened by fear, hatred, bigotry, prejudice, selfishness and disinterest. Most importantly he helped the excluded to flourish in love.

Jean did not lay his baton down when he died but handed it on in trust to a new generation who like him believe that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. So too is his message- love one another. In his Five Quintets, the poet Micheal O'Siadhail imagines a conversation with Jean Vanier whom he greatly admired, in which Jean says:

I think I yearned/ to soothe a human wound of loneliness/ which each of us alone has slowly learned / to heal in yielding to a greater yes/that bends to wash the bruised and unloved feet/ to tend with water and the towel's caress/...what if the weak become our first concern/what if such love decides our balance sheet?"

What if indeed? What if today we waste the chance to entertain angels?