

Friday of the 17th Week of the Year, II, August 1, 2014 (#405), First Friday

I have been to a number of the country's top zoos over the years of traveling between coasts to visit family on the other end of the continent. It is uncanny how often I have been greeted with pink flamingoes at the entrance to these attractions, as if it has been mandated by some central authority. The most common species is Chilean variety, since they tend to be particularly pink, which, along with their natural slender grace, and their habit of perching on one leg, makes them stand out, so to speak, among birds. However, their pink coloration does not result from their DNA. Rather, it is an acquired characteristic, based on their diet of pink shrimp. We may enjoy an occasional shrimp cocktail; but they eat them all the time, and so the hue affects their feathers, and makes them look so distinctive. As the old sayings go, You are what you eat, and You are what you wear.

Recall how earlier this week, Jeremiah spoke to the Lord, saying, "When I found your words, I devoured them. They became the joy of my heart." I recall falling in love with the Word of God back during my freshman year in college, when an evangelical friend invited me to attend a weekly Bible study on campus. Much to this group's eventual chagrin, that daily reading led me to daily Mass, and eventually into the seminary, which just goes to show how dangerous and life-altering the Word can be. Such was the case with Jeremiah, since his internalizing of the Word turned him into a prophet. You see, he became so full of the Word through regular ingestion that what had entered his soul through his ears eventually began to flow out of him through his mouth, much to the chagrin of his contemporaries. The reason? He saw how much Israel was violating that Word, and so, in order to try to avert national destruction, he admonished the people to change their sinful behavior. Indeed, he offers them both the carrot and the stick in our first reading today. Initially he says, speaking for the Lord, "Perhaps they will listen and turn back, each from his evil way, so that I may repent of the evil I have planned to inflict upon them for their evil deeds." However, he soon adds, "If you disobey me, not living according to the Law I placed before you and not listening to the words of my servants the prophets ... I will treat this house like Shiloh, and make this the city which all the nations of the earth shall refer to when cursing another." Shiloh had been the former location of the meeting tent, which housed the Ark of the Covenant long before Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem. However, because of Israel's sins, the Lord turned over the Ark to the Philistines, and allowed Shiloh to be destroyed. Jeremiah prophesies the same fate for the seemingly impregnable capital city of Jerusalem if the people don't turn from their idols and their oppression and their bloodshed and seek him through the Law. The people who heard this Temple Sermon did not appreciate the comparison, and so grabbed the prophet and declared that he deserved death for cursing Jerusalem, although, ironically, he was actually trying to avert the coming disaster. However, unlike the pagan Ninevites, who converted at the preaching of the foreign prophet Jonah, these people refused to heed their countryman Jeremiah, and so the city was destroyed, not because of his words, but in spite of them, and because of the people's insistence on remaining in spiritual denial. Eventually, after various persecutions, Jeremiah was stoned to death by his own people in Egypt, tasting in advance the Cross of Christ.

It is not surprising, then, that, when Jesus asks his disciples who people are saying he is, they respond with not only the names Moses and Elijah, but also Jeremiah. After all, not only were both celibate, very unusually for that culture, but both spoke the Word of God in undiluted form, and received persecution as their reward. We see this resistance happening to Jesus in our gospel reading today, from Saint Matthew. While not as bad as when, in Luke, his fellow townspeople try to throw him off a cliff, today these people take umbrage at the fact that this simple carpenter has suddenly got religion, and is now wandering around preaching. Thus, they did something worse than threaten him: they ignored him, so that he worked few miracles among them. Once again, as with Jeremiah, we see the truth of Jesus' words, "No prophet is without honor except in his native place." However, Jesus, like Jeremiah, had more earnest enemies, in the religious leaders, so that both of them could say, in the words of our responsory today, Psalm 69, "Those outnumber the hairs of my head who hate me without cause. Too many for my strength are those who wrongfully are my enemies." Wrongfully, because these prophets are seeking the good of those around them, but are persecuted for their trouble. The question is, Why?

We see a red herring in what the people, the priests and the paid prophets say to Jeremiah as the ostensible reason for wanting to put him to death: "Why do you prophesy in the name of the Lord: 'This house shall be like Shiloh,' and 'This city shall be desolate and deserted?'" They fear that his words are a curse, when in fact they are an invitation to repent. And it is this message of repentance that is the real reason they hate him, since they want to remain steeped in sin, but with no consequences. They are in fact tied to the tracks, and Jeremiah sees the freight train bearing down on them, and through his challenging words is trying to untie them. However, they refuse his ministrations, until the day the Babylonian locomotive strikes, and the glorious city is destroyed.

So here's the challenge for us: eating shrimp, and turning pink. Or, to put it another way, to ingest the Word of God, and then become so full of it that you turn into a prophet. Now, you might say, that happened to me, in that I fell in love with the Bible, like Jeremiah, in my youth, and it turned me into a public preacher. But you are settled in your own lives, and so seem immune from such a dynamic. However, you are what you eat, and if you start reading the Word of God each day, and meditating on it, so that it sinks from your ears to your mind, and eventually into your heart and soul, then it will at some point start flowing out. Now it is true that such a flow is not always prudent or appropriate, the way we have all encountered Evangelicals who have beaten us over the head with the Bible, trying to convince us that the Catholic Church is wrong on everything, from Mary to the pope to the Eucharist, when in fact all of these teachings are in there. (Parenthetically, Catholics can do the same thing with the *Catechism*, admittedly, either from the right or from the left.) However, the more effective approach for most people is through a steady witness to God through action where he has placed you, especially at work and at home. By avoiding sin, and practicing virtue, which you at times augment with a word about the faith, you establish credibility, and so preach with both speech and action. In this way, you fulfill the call we all received at baptism: to share in the prophetic office of Christ.

However, as in the past, so today: people don't always want to be challenged in that way, and may start to persecute you. It will probably not get to the point of threats on your life; but when some people start kidding you about being a saint, while others

stop being friendly to you, and others start calling you a hypocrite, then you know that you are sharing in the noble tradition of Jeremiah and Jesus himself. You can avoid such hassle, of course, by closing your Bible, so that the Word of God does not come to possess your life; but then you miss the adventure of grace, of holiness, of being a prophet, knowing that you are making a positive contribution to the world. The saints tended to be criticized and persecuted for their commitment to the Word of God too, but look at all the good they did in spite of it all. We can join their number by becoming people of the Word, feeding there regularly, and then sharing this heavenly bread with others.

So the question is, Do I want to become a prophet, and spread the word of God to others? Or do I want to close my ears, and my heart, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to me each day? To put it another way, Do I want to be like Jesus and Jeremiah, or do I want to be like the people who rejected them? That Evangelical in college may have had an anti-Catholic ax to grind; but at least he was being in his own way a prophet by speaking the Word to me as he perceived it. In the end, we can just be one of a flock of boring birds like sparrows, a species nobody ever goes to the zoo to see. Or we can eat all that shrimp and so become beautiful, eye-catching flamingoes, so impressive and distinctive that you will find them as the animals that most zoos use to get you in the door to see the rest of the menagerie. So you can be a squat, plain, boring pigeon; or you can be a tall, colorful, distinctive flamingo. The choice of yours. But after all, would you rather eat slimy worms and dirty seeds, or succulent shrimp?