

Saturday of the 17<sup>th</sup> Week of the Year, II, August 2, 2014 (#406)

Some of you may be old enough to recall the Vietnam War, which was raging when I was in late grade school and high school, in the sixties and early seventies. Because North Vietnam had not attacked us, there was a perception among some that we should not have attacked them in the first place. The reality was rather more complicated, since Communist North Vietnam was being supported by Communist China, and it was unclear whether China was expanding politically, or simply supporting an ally. There were also some who believed that our primary interest in South Vietnam was not their freedom, but possible oil reserves. Thus, different persons of good faith had various reads on the situation. Still, there were those who supported the president completely, and assumed that if we were fighting the war, we should have been. Thus, to them, the peace movement, which believed itself to be patriotic in getting us out of a conflict that was making us look bad, as aggressors, was in fact betraying the country. Thus, there were instances of violence being used domestically against it, as at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968, and the disastrous shootings at Kent State University two years later, in which four unarmed students protestors were killed by the National Guard. When the military gets involved in national policy, it often becomes dangerous to be perceived as being out of step with the majority.

You can easily imagine, then, the sorts of negative feelings that Jeremiah stirred-up in his day in Jerusalem when he recommended desertion to the enemy Babylonians. You see, he had already been threatening Judah with destruction for its sins, insisting that if they did not convert, they would be destroyed. The priests and the prophets, as we heard yesterday, threatened this man with death. However, today we hear that the princes intervened, and so his life was spared. A happy ending. But things are not over yet. Jeremiah continued his message of doom and gloom, going so far as to assert that the city was fated for destruction now, no matter what the people did, and that the only way they could save their lives was to leave individually and desert to the other side. Well, by the time he is saying this sort of thing a dozen or so chapters later in the book, even the princes have turned against him, since he is now demoralizing the soldiers, and so is perceived as being a subversive working for Babylon. Thus, they complain to the king, who feels he has no choice but to hand him over to them, who lower him into a miry cistern to die of hunger and thirst. At this point, we can see that perhaps Jeremiah was the author of our responsory today, Psalm 69, which begins, "Rescue me out of the mire; may I not sink! May I be rescued from my foes." As if in answer to that prayer, one of the king's foreign courtiers, a man named Ebed-Melech, which name literally means Servant of the King, hears of it and intervenes with the ruler, who finally puts his foot down and has the prophet rescued. Thus, he is once again saved. Clearly, he leads a charmed life. Indeed, by the end of the 52-chapter book, his predictions have come to pass, but he has been spared by Babylon because of his message, although he refuses to receive any further special treatment or favors from Israel's enemy, showing his true disinterested patriotism. However, he is kidnapped by a local faction that flees Jerusalem to Egypt, where the book ends, although according to Jewish tradition he was eventually stoned to death there by his own countrymen for continuing to call them to reform their sinful lives. Thus, his hour finally arrived.

As it did for Jesus. This vocabulary is, of course, mainly Johannine, in that Jesus escaped death earlier on in his public ministry, only because his hour of glory was still in the future. His own seemingly charmed existence in walking away repeatedly from danger finally caught up with him on Good Friday. We get an adumbration of this fact in our gospel reading today, which involves a literary inclusion. The passage begins with Herod speaking of Jesus, imagining that he is John the Baptist come back from the dead; and ends with the disciples of John informing Jesus about their master's death. Thus, what we hear in-between will concern Jesus. And what is that? The death of John. He too seemed to be leading a charmed life, with all of Israel coming to him to be baptized. But now he makes a political faux pas, offending Herod's wife Herodias by insisting that their marriage was immoral. Herodias had him in her sights from then on, and finally engineered his execution when her daughter, through a lascivious dance for a drunken king, manages to get the head of the Baptist delivered on a platter, a story that vies with the theater of the absurd in our own day for gratuitousness. Thus, the message that Saint Matthew is sending to the perceptive reader is that what befell John is one day going to befall Jesus, who will likewise stand before Herod before his walk up Golgotha to his death. Thus, we have three men whose names begin with J, and who are celibate, lead a life seemingly free from consequences, until reality finally hits them in the face. Is that really the way that God treats his most faithful servants?

A saint whose feast we celebrate next week is yet another celibate whose name begins with J, John Mary Baptist Vianney, the patron of priests. Now it is true that he died in bed at the age of 73, after a long priestly life, in which he was known throughout France as the confessor par excellence. Indeed, by the end of his life, he was spending over a dozen hours a day in the confessional, which his biographer wrote was the greatest of the many penances of this holy man. However, he long had the desire to retire to a monastery and lead a life of simple prayer, and even more penance. However, his bishop, sensing his divinely-appointed vocation as a pastor, never granted him permission. Thus, while he was not killed physically, he voluntarily died to his own will each day he stepped into the confessional, spending his life on the forgiveness of the sins of others. In this way, by placing aside his own will and doing the will of God, he died to himself, thus joining his life to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Thus, we see that, once again, the life of the saint seems to be no picnic. Indeed, Saint Teresa of Avila, who was often frustrated with the resistance that she received from other nuns in reforming the Carmelite Order, once expressed her pent-up frustration to Jesus about it when falling off a horse while crossing a stream. He responded that that was the way he treated all his friends, to which she retorted, "That's why you have so few of them!"

So the question is, Do we want to be the friends of Jesus, if this is how he treats them? Jeremiah, John the Baptist, John Vianney, and Teresa all knew this frustration. So was the hassle worth it? Well, the fact that they all share heavenly glory now, and for all time, is probably the best answer to that question. However, even on earth, in the midst of their trials, they all had the consolation of knowing that, no matter what the cost, they were doing the will of God, and that realization would have been their greatest consolation: that they were pleasing the One they loved, even if he was playing a love game of hiding from them for a time, as seen in the Song of Songs. Indeed, mystics like Teresa, who was allowed to write about her experiences of Jesus, taught that the suffering and sacrifice simply cleared away the rubbish in our lives, so that Jesus would feel like a

welcome guest in the soul, and so manifest himself at times, in ways that most people could not dream of this side of heaven. I am not even referring to extraordinary revelations, such as Teresa enjoyed, but rather to the ordinary sense that Jesus is with one, no matter what, so that even suffering is relativized by that realization. Indeed, one begins to see that it is precisely in this suffering that one is more closely united to the Beloved, Christ crucified. Now Jeremiah and John did it before Jesus, and so were to an extent flying in the dark, which makes them even more heroic. However, we all have not only the example, but also the companionship and grace, of Jesus, which, while not reducing suffering to nothing, at last gives it a context, and a meaning, and a limit.

We all have the right to avoid unnecessary suffering, such as by going to the doctor when sick, or leaving a bad job for a better one. However, when suffering is, for the moment, here to stay, we can continue to fight it, or we can accept it as a privileged share in the Passion of Christ – as did our saint today, the martyr Eusebius of Vercelli – and so discover not only the grace of God in it, but God himself. May we all so fall in love with Jesus that we are willing to climb any mountain and swim any river to be with him, knowing that the suffering is temporary, and that the rewards are eternal. Thus are the concluding words of Psalm 69 today seen to apply to us: “See, you lowly ones, and be glad; you who seek God, may your hearts be merry! For the Lord hears the poor, and his own who are in bonds he spurns not.” Let us choose to be the friends of God, and so have the faith to know that we are not alone in suffering, the hope to know that it will one day end, and the love to shoulder it for Jesus, until the day when faith turns into vision, hope turns into heaven, and love turns into deification. If that’s not a charmed life, I don’t know what is.