

## ***Contradiction and opposition***

Revd Connie Gerrity  
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*Jeremiah 20:7-18; Psalm 69:7-19; Romans 6:1-11; Matthew 10:24-39*

Both our Old Testament and our gospel readings this morning focus upon the cost of being a disciple, a person of God. It is a topic which is very fitting as we consider the lot of our fellow believers in Zimbabwe many of whom at the present time have been locked out of their churches and some of them tortured because they have dared to speak out for justice and democracy in their nation.

The Old Testament reading from the book of Jeremiah is a cry of lament by the prophet to his God — a cry which of great poignancy because Jeremiah's call to be God's prophet was his life's work. Born to a priestly family at Anathoth in the days of King Josiah, Jeremiah was called by God to the task of prophecy while he was still a child.

It was a call to a thankless task because the southern kingdom of Judah to whom he was sent refused to hear God's message and persecuted God's messenger. In the verses which precede today's reading, Jeremiah has been beaten and put in stocks overnight.

He is at the end of his tether and he spits the dummy! He complains to God. "God you have enticed me; you have overpowered me. Because of you I have become a laughingstock. No one takes me seriously. I have no friends. And yet at the same time if I don't communicate the message you have given me, it is as though there is a fire set inside me, I have no choice but to carry out the ministry you have given me."

It is no easy job to be a prophet because prophecy is not what we would otherwise think of as fortune-telling if it were not in church. It's not related to reading bumps in the scalp and tea-leaves and star signs, or interpreting airy-fairy visions. In fact prophecy isn't so much about foretelling the future as it is pointing out where the present is headed if it's allowed to go in the direction it has taken. And prophecy is very much a task of the church. It is a part of our being the salt of society and a light for the world.

Jesus in our gospel this morning talks about the role his disciples are to have. "A student — a disciple — is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher and the servant like his master.

Jesus calls us to live out the principles of the kingdom, to show forth God's love in our lives, to stand up for what is right and to expose injustice and exploitation. But as we do this, we, his disciples, his people, are bound to meet opposition just as he himself met opposition.

Opposition to the gospel is inevitable. so much so that whenever the church experiences no opposition it is time to undertake a serious examination of conscience. Lack of opposition almost certainly indicates a church which has lost its nerve.

Contradiction and opposition were certainly the lot of Jesus. Even as a baby, when his parents brought him to the temple in Jerusalem to make the appropriate sacrifices giving thanks for the arrival of their first-born son, the old man Simeon announced that he would be a sign of contradiction destined for the rise and fall of many, a sign to be rejected.

Biblical scholars have identified the gospel of Matthew as containing five major discourses. The first of these collections of teaching is contained in chapters 5 to 7 — what we commonly call the Sermon on the Mount. In the Sermon on the Mount we have the message of the kingdom—a sort of Magna Carta for those who wish to enter the kingdom.

Our reading this morning comes from the second discourse, which scholars have named the missionary discourse. This collection of teaching deals with the mission of Jesus' followers and how they are to conduct themselves as they go out to do the work of the kingdom — proclaiming the Gospel and bringing healing to the sick and distressed. Jesus tells them that they will meet opposition but that in the face of that opposition, they are not to be afraid. And that message is for us too.

Opposition to the challenge of the gospel come from three sources. First of all there is opposition that comes first from our own weakness, our own darkness. We fear the discomfort and dread the cost of commitment. That is what Jeremiah's lament is about — he is in there doing his work as prophet but very discouraged about it because he is being ridiculed and persecuted and it appears that his message is not being received at all. Jeremiah wants to give up and yet he finds cannot do anything except speak because when he tries to hold his peace God's message is like burning fire within him. And so in spite of the fact that he begins with a complaint against God he also turns to God for comfort and his lament ends with words of renewed confidence that the Lord will take care of him: "O lord of Hosts, you test the righteous you see the heart and the mind; to you I have committed my cause."

And so we also in the face of opposition are called to put all our hope in God. We are called to speak out because for evil to triumph requires no more than that good people say nothing. Jesus tells his followers — tells us not to be afraid. but to bring our fears and our discouragement to God in prayer that those fears may be changed to a brave public proclamation and a courageous witness for all to hear and see.

The second type of opposition comes from the outside — from those whose eyes are accustomed to the darkness and who do not wish to live in the light of Christ. For the light of Christ exposes what is shonky and unworthy, the things which are the product of malice and envy and greed and dishonesty. Goodness is a terrible threat to those whose consciences are compromised by evil. They will reply in cynicism and scoffing and argument and eventually in blind violence. Jesus himself was done to death by a conspiracy of fears and jealousy on the part of those who had compromised themselves for religious power, political advancement and money.

But Jesus says again to his disciples — and to us that when we are confronted by people who prefer the darkness to the light of the kingdom, we are not to be afraid. Those who torture the body often strengthen the spirit. — And the experience of the church in mission throughout the ages is that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. — God's love in the disciple's life is indeed stronger than death itself.

Finally the ultimate source of opposition to the advance of the kingdom of God is the force of evil itself. Paul says to the church at Ephesus "It is not against human enemies that ultimately we must struggle but against Sovereignities and Powers who originate the darkness in this world, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens." (Eph. 6:12)

We live in a time in which we are very aware of evil. In the late 1990's we thought we had it all together didn't we? The Berlin wall had fallen and there was a new climate of freedom everywhere.

But then the world was shocked by the reality of 9/11 and the Bali bombings and those more recently in London and now the terrorist threat which seems to be everywhere. There is also war in Iraq and Afghanistan, bombings in Israel and Palestine and evil regimes in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. We are well aware that evil exists. Even here in Australia as we consider the grip which drugs or alcohol or the compulsion to gamble hold over the lives of so many, we are aware of the power of evil.

But the good news —the good news to which we must cling with all our might — is that however terrifying the backlash of evil may appear, the power and the love of God, our Creator and Redeemer is greater, Jesus says not a hair falls out, not a sparrow alights and hops about but the eye of God sees and the heart of God cares. Very precious in the sight of God are all those who suffer rejection and opposition for the sake of justice and righteousness— for the sake of the advancement of God’s kingdom and the proclamation of God’s truth. We can be sure that whatever happens, we cannot drift beyond the love and care of God. Our times are always in God’s hands and God will not leave us or forsake us. We will always be surrounded by the care of God.

And if that is so, of whom then shall we be afraid? Amen.