

20th Sunday C (2013)

Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

A list of the names most frequently given to children was published last week. Biblical names have been making a comeback among boys, with *Noah*, *Seth*, *Jacob* and *Elijah* becoming popular. This news came on the same day that a court in the United States refused to allow parents to name their child *Messiah*. A few months ago I baptised my first *Jedediah*, which you'll recall was the name given to Solomon, son and successor of King David, by the prophet Nathan (another popular name). I look forward to my first *Habbakuk*. And isn't it time *Obadiah* made a return to favour?

My dad, as I have told you before, was Christened *Jeremiah*. A name my mother hated. But then, she was not a Scripture scholar. Jeremiah gave up the first reading, a part of his long persecution in the service of God's Word and Truth.

Jeremiah was called to God's service as a youth and given a terrifying commission: he was to speak God's Word to a headstrong, rebellious people, to tear down and build up as necessary. He would relentlessly announce a dismal future which the people of Judah and Jerusalem had brought on themselves by their failure to trust in Yahweh; and his sad fate was never to be listened to; to be castigated as a false prophet and suffer humiliation and, as we heard in the first reading, to be thrown into the pit - a black, watery hole with steep dripping sides from which release was only possible by being hauled up by rope.

Jeremiah was a prophet of action as well as word. He used street theatre to demonstrate what was to happen. Most famously perhaps he wore a wooden yoke to show that the people would soon be under the yoke of the Babylonians. Another prophet, a false one, spoke against him and broke the yoke. So, in obedience to the voice of the Lord, Jeremiah had an iron yoke made and wore that.

Jeremiah was celibate at the command of the Lord. Most unusual for a Jewish male because God's first command was "Go forth and multiply". This was another sign - children should not be brought into the world because such horrors were to come upon Judah and Jerusalem.

Receiving and speaking God's Word were a dreadful ordeal for the prophet. It brought him agony. The only thing to give him more pain was **not** speaking the Word. And he lived to see his words come true. Nebuccadnezzar's forces destroyed the cities of Judah, laid siege to Jerusalem, and eventually destroyed city and Temple and deported the rulers and the professional classes. Jeremiah, seen as an ally, for he had counselled giving in to the inevitable, was allowed to remain until some others of the remnant, ignoring his advice to stay, dragged him with them to Egypt. We hear no more of his fate in the biblical story but legend tells of him being stoned.

While Jeremiah's words of gloom are what people, like my mother, know of him, his message is one of hope. He looks forward to a time when there will be a new covenant written on the heart of each individual. I cannot think that Jesus did not have this in mind when he spoke of a new covenant in his own blood.

It is also in the spirit of Jeremiah that Jesus speaks in today's Gospel. "I came to bring fire to the earth" is the motto of my *alma mater*, the English College in Rome, from whose doors came forty four martyrs of the Reformation, including Ralph Sherwin. Jesus promises not peace but division and family splits. This might perturb us when we remember that at Jesus' birth, according to this same Gospel of Luke, the angels sang, "Peace on earth". Now the grown up Jesus is promising not peace but a sword.

The martyrs were aware that their lives would be far from peaceful. The peace Jesus promises is not a peace given by this world. It is peace achieved by struggle.

We may not be called to be martyrs, but we are all prophets, in the line of Jeremiah, commissioned so by our baptism. In the Gospel Jesus compares his future suffering to a baptism. A reminder that baptism is not an empty ceremony that gives an excuse for a party. Baptism is the first preparation for living and dying with Christ. After the pouring of water the newly baptised is anointed with the oil of chrism, set apart for sacred duty as were priests, prophets and kings of old. Roles brought to their fulfilment in Christ and roles in which we share by being made Christ-like. As prophets we should expect to suffer for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. If we speak out in the name of Jesus and to uphold Gospel values we will be derided, scorned and abused, even physically attacked.

We must all have Jeremiah as our patron; and, if we get to know the man better, his name might rise up that popularity chart for boy's names.