

Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 25th August 2019, Pentecost 11

Readings: **Jeremiah 1:4-10**

Psalms 71:1-6

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

The Old Testament reading this week describes God calling the very young Jeremiah to speak uncomfortable truths to the leaders of his nation. Some of the words are undoubtedly familiar because over the years they have offered reassurance, identity, and purpose to many. When we read, or listen, to the story we happily make the leap that God was not just speaking to a Jewish boy two thousand six hundred years ago, he was also speaking to us. God was not just saying to Jeremiah, *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...”* God was also saying this to us!

And why would we not embrace this if we’re feeling pretty small and insignificant in the scheme of things; and, when we’re feeling pretty powerless to bring about positive change in a world that has plenty of issues? The text suggests to Jeremiah, and to us, that even before we were conceived the creator of the universe knew who we were, and helped to form us while we were growing in the womb. I’m immediately reminded of the joyful refrain found in the 2015 Bethel Music song *‘No Longer Slaves’* which affirms, *“I’m no longer a slave to fear, I am a child of God. I’m no longer a slave to fear, I am a child of God.”*

The words reassuringly suggest that we are not as insignificant or powerless as we think, and that our best identity is found in the understanding that we are known, created, and loved by God.

But, before we feel too comfortable in this, the text goes on to describe God calling Jeremiah to be a prophet, and being a prophet is a risky thing in any age. To challenge the greed, self-interest, and unjust practices of powerful people in religion, politics, and business... is a risky thing. It was then, and continues to be in our time. When we read through the whole of Jeremiah we can see that his recurring message – that worship and justice matter to God - was generally not welcomed.

But, Jeremiah’s initial response to God’s call was not based on the fear of living an uncomfortable life. He is remembered saying, *“Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy...”* Jeremiah knew that his abilities were limited, and didn’t think he’d be up to the task. He was a boy in a culture that valued the opinion of adult men, and he wasn’t good at public speaking which was going to be a core skill for the task. In response God is remembered saying, *“Don’t be afraid... for I am with you...”*

There is interesting wisdom here which suggests that God will equip those who are called, and not necessarily call those who are equipped! That God calls unlikely people to lead and bring about change seems to be a recurring theme in both Old and New Testaments. For God called Moses the murderer to go back to Egypt and lead a community he was alienated from; and God called David the shepherd to challenge Goliath the professional soldier. God called the teenage girl Mary to have a baby, and her son called fishermen to be public speakers. If God called all these unlikely people... surely God also calls us?

But, I want to go back to Jeremiah. We don’t know how old he was, but he called himself a ‘boy’. So, he could have been ten, eleven, or twelve years old. Picture this – a Grade 7 student, right on the edge of puberty, his voice starting to break, with wisps of early beard hair on his chin – claiming to speak in the name of God to the most powerful leaders of his country. It would have been a tough gig, but it’s not hard to find similar examples in our time.

Malala Yousafzai was born on the twelfth of July, 1997, in Mingora, a large city in Pakistan. It seems that from an early age Malala had a thirst for knowledge which was greatly encouraged by her father who was a teacher. In 2007, when Malala was ten years old, the Taliban came to dominate much of northwestern Pakistan including the valley that Malala lived in. Girls were banned from attending school, and were not allowed to dance or watch television. Suicide attacks were widespread, and by the end of 2008 the Taliban had destroyed more than four hundred schools.

In early 2009, at the age of eleven, Malala started to blog anonymously on the Urdu language site of the British Broadcasting Corporation (the BBC) and using the pseudonym “Gul Makai,” she titled her first blog “I am afraid”.

Over the next three years, Malala and her father became known throughout Pakistan for their determination to give Pakistani girls access to a free, quality education. Her activism resulted in a nomination for the International Children’s Peace Prize in 2011, and she was awarded Pakistan’s National Youth Peace Prize that year. But, not everyone supported her campaign to bring about change, and on October 9th, 2012, a bus carrying Malala and her friends was stopped by two members of the Taliban. When they were clear about which girl was Malala, they shot her in the head. Malala was just fifteen years old.

It is miraculous that Malala survived, and that there was no brain damage, but after multiple surgeries in the UK, Malala began attending school in Birmingham, five months after she was shot. Four months later, on her 16th birthday, Malala visited New York and spoke at the United Nations. Later that year, her first book was published with the unambiguous title, “I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban.”

In 2014 Malala travelled to Jordan to meet Syrian refugees, to Kenya to meet young female students, and then northern Nigeria. While in Nigeria, she spoke out in support of the girls who had been kidnapped by Boko Haram, which, like the Taliban, does not allow girls and women to be educated.

In October 2014, when she was just seventeen, Malala was named a Nobel Peace Prize winner, along with Indian children’s rights activist Kailash Satyarthi. In this Malala became the youngest person ever to receive the prize. When accepting the award, Malala affirmed that, *“This award is not just for me. It is for those forgotten children who want education. It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change.”*

Because of age, gender, and injury Malala could be considered one of the least likely people to effectively challenge the status quo of Pakistan and yet she did, and in this there is something important that enriches our reading of Jeremiah. It seems that it does not matter how old or young we are; how great our ability is or how little; whether we have been injured, or have never known injury. What really matters is our passion to make a difference for good, and our willingness to give it a go! As people of faith we believe that we are known by God, we are loved by God, and we are each called by God to play our part in making the world a better place.

So... God’s blessing on your pilgrimage, and mine... as we live our lives, and respond to God’s call each day. I pray in the name of the one we call the Christ, Amen.