

# 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year

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Today's readings link the call of the prophet Jeremiah and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jeremiah has a reputation as a bringer of messages of gloom and doom – bad news rather than good news! He certainly finds much to condemn in the society and political leaders of his day. His call is dated to 626 BC. Josiah had just succeeded to the kingship at the age of eight after the death of his father Amon who had fostered the worship of pagan gods. Jeremiah encouraged Josiah to introduce religious and social reforms in the teeth of opposition. For a number of years this transformed the country but outside the borders trouble was looming. Assyria was on its last legs and the King of Egypt sought to capitalise on this by seizing Israel. Josiah was killed in battle in 609 BC. He prevented his eldest son becoming King and in his place installed a younger brother Jehoiakim. Contrary to Jeremiah's warnings Jehoiakim threw in his lot with Egypt against the new power of Babylon. In 597 Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, carried Jehoiakim into exile and installed another son of Josiah, Zedekiah as king. Zedekiah imprisoned Jeremiah for his opposition and again rebelled against Babylon. Again Babylon attacked this time ending the Kingdom of David permanently in 586 BC – but the Babylonian freed Jeremiah because he had sought to prevent the rebellion.

Jeremiah's message involved telling the truth to those who did not want to hear it but his driving motive was not anger or sourness but a desire to remind people that their God loved them and would stand by them if only they would turn to him instead of relying on political manoeuvring and force. He has left us with beautiful words of reassurance especially in chapters 30-31: "I have loved you with an everlasting love." "You shall be my people and I will be your God." Our Lord too knows that his many of his people will not listen to him, especially their leaders, and yet others, those on the edges of society, Samaritan, even pagans will be more open to his message of God's love and more willing to follow the way he teaches.

God's merciful love is not about ignoring evil but reaching out to us in love, whatever our situation, and inviting us to respond by living in the way that brings health and salvation. St Paul emphasises this in writing to the people of Corinth. Eloquence, prophecy, even faith or philanthropy, is valueless without love. Love is not self-regarding but seeks the good of others. Love is ready to excuse, to trust and to hope because no one is beyond redemption or the touch of God's mercy. But love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth. The challenge is to find ways of speaking the truth in love so that people will not be put off by God's message but their hearts opened to it.

It is not loving to remain silent when we see people heading in a destructive direction – whether as individuals or as a society, but our words must not be driven by anger or bitterness. We have to find a way that will be honest but also show that we care about the person or our society. In an individual context we call this 'fraternal correction' – taking someone aside as we would a member of our family and trying to persuade them to do what is right. We must not be afraid but we must also be conscious of our own fallibility and limited vision and understanding. We should not simply 'speak our mind' but should first ask the Lord not only to help us to see things with his eyes, but also to find the right time and place and the most appropriate words. St Francis de Sales said, "You catch more flies with a teaspoon of honey than a barrel of vinegar". People did not always listen to Our Lord. When he said to the rich young man, "You lack one thing – sell your goods and give the proceeds to the poor" it was a step too far. Sometimes they did listen. Think of the woman to whom he said, "Neither do I condemn you – go and sin no more", or the woman by the well of Sychar. However poor our words God may speak through us to the heart of that person.