

## 2019 20<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY

One of the greatest tragedies in the history of Judaism was being invaded by the Babylonians in 587BC. Thousands of citizens of Jerusalem were massacred. Those who survived were taken as slaves to Babylon. The beautiful Temple built by King Solomon four hundred years earlier was laid to ruins. It was a tragedy of immense proportions.

The temptation for the Jews in the days that followed was to interpret this tragedy as God's punishment upon them for constantly flirting with pagan gods.

But today's 1<sup>st</sup> Reading from the Prophet Jeremiah makes it clear that God was not to be blamed for Israel's defeat by the Babylonians- that God had tried to avert the tragedy; but King Zedekiah and his advisers had been deaf to God's warnings.

At the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, there were two super-powers in the World- Babylon and Egypt. They hated each other. Babylon was aggressively expanding, making its way South towards Egypt, conquering all nations on the way. Israel was neighbour to Egypt and King Zedekiah thought his Kingdom would be safe if they allied themselves with Egypt.

Inspired by God, the Prophet Jeremiah warned King Zedekiah that Egypt was not to be trusted and would not come to their aid. If Israel was to avoid annihilation, they would have to sue for peace with Babylon and be prepared to pay a hugely expensive yearly tribute to Babylon. King Zedekiah refused to countenance the idea of being subservient to the Babylonians and committed his nation to a hopeless, catastrophic war. The words of God given to him through the Prophet Jeremiah were rejected. The King and his fellow leaders accused Jeremiah of defeatism and in an effort to prevent him disheartening the people and destroying what morale they had, commanded that he be dropped to the bottom of a muddy well and left for dead.

The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians could not be interpreted as God's punishment on Israel for dabbling with foreign gods. God had warned the leaders of Israel, through the Prophet Jeremiah, of the most prudent form of action. But through arrogance and stupidity the King had not listened.

Now let's turn to the Gospel. Christ was a man of Peace. His constant greeting was 'Shalom'- Peace be with you.

So how do we interpret Jesus' words in today's Gospel: "Do you suppose that I have come to bring peace on earth? No I tell you, rather division."

Jesus was a Prophet and there are no greater disruptors of 'peace' than prophets who stand opposed to what can be seen as a false peace. It is a false peace when whole sections of a community are trodden under and oppressed. True peace is when all people are able to live with dignity.

Christ reached out to the marginalised of Israel with compassion and called the leaders of his nation 'blind guides' because they contemptuously demeaned and exploited the ordinary people of Israel. The leaders responded by labelling Jesus as a trouble-maker, a man possessed by Satan, a breaker of the Law.

Followers of Jesus who bravely expose the corruption of those who exploit the poor will always be seen as threats to the 'false peace' by those who want injustice and corruption to remain in place.

Bishop Helder Camera of Brazil once famously said: "When I give bread to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no bread, they call me a communist."

The Church is the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit dwells in the Church and inspires it in its teachings- just as God inspired Jeremiah and the Prophets in the days of old.

How did God speak to Israel? Through the Prophets.

How does God speak to the world today? Through the Church.

On Thursday Martin Hanson wrote yet another anti-Catholic Letter to the Gisborne Herald- mocking Catholics this time for our openness to life in the act of Marriage. In his Letters he continually pours contempt upon Catholics for our opposition to Abortion and our opposition to the End of Life Bill.

Just as the Prophet Jeremiah was hated by King Zedekiah and dumped into the muddy well, so the Church is hated by the Martin Hanson's of this world and tossed aside contemptuously for speaking prophetically.

And just as God was not to blame for the Babylonian Captivity, so God will not be able to be blamed for the moral chaos which New Zealand is descending into as more and more people come into power who have no respect for the sanctity of life.

We must hold onto our Faith in the Church. We must pass our Faith onto our children and Grandchildren. It is precious. Within the Church we hear the prophetic Voice of God.

We must be proud to be Catholic. If there is to be hope for the World, all Catholics must stand united behind Pope Francis and like him bravely challenge all that is unjust, all that demeans life. This is how God is speaking to the world today.