

4th Sunday of Ordinary Time
February 1, 2004 – Cathedral of St. Mary
Bishop Samuel J. Aquila

I shared with Fr. Goering on Monday morning when I woke up and it was 32 below zero, that I am now finally experiencing a real North Dakota winter! This morning when I walked into church Father Hughes told me that the church was 60 degrees, as the heat had gone out, so he said “Bishop, preach a hell fire and brimstone homily to warm it up.” Certainly our readings lend that opportunity.

In our first reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah and in the Gospel we hear of the importance of the prophet and of speaking as the prophet. Jeremiah, in reflecting on his mission, recognizes that it is the Lord who forms him. It is the Lord who, even before he was born, formed him in the womb and dedicated him as a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah, knowing the people that he is sent to, is terrified. God reminds him that he is to “stand up and tell them all that I command you.” He reminds Jeremiah that He will be with him. “It is I this day who have made you a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass against the whole land: They will fight against you but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

A promise is given to every prophet that when he goes before the people, that even if the people reject him, God is still with him. The prophet recognizes that his strength comes from God and God alone. God makes the prophet into that pillar of fire, that wall of brass, even though the whole land may be against him. We see that in our Gospel reading. Jesus goes forth and He speaks clearly to the people of His own town. He tells them, as He reads from the prophet Isaiah, about the servant and the messiah, the anointed one, that “today the scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” He points to Himself as the messiah. The people, because of the hardness of their hearts, question how this can be. “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?” Jesus responds immediately. “I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.”

Jesus minces no words with them. He speaks of the days of Elijah in which Elijah goes to a woman who is outside of Israel and she is the one who is aided by his prophecy, because Israel is hard of heart. He quotes Elisha and once again reminds them that it is not the people of Israel who are healed by the prophet but a foreigner, a Syrian, Naaman. The people are not happy with Jesus and with what He is saying to them. They take him out and want to throw Him over a hill, but He walks away.

The role of the prophet is always to speak the truth, in season and out of season. When we look at these readings and apply them to our own day, and the culture of death in which we live, we as Catholics must begin to speak more clearly the truth of the Gospel. There would be some who would argue that Jesus should have led the people more gently along. It is His first homily in the Gospel of Luke. Yet He essentially says “You are the ones whose hearts are hardened. You are not receiving God into them. You are not allowing yourselves to be

formed by God.” He calls the people to shame. The same is true of Jeremiah. When one reads the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah minces no words. He goes to the core of the problem, of the idolatry, the sorcery, the adultery that the people have fallen into. The same is true within our own society today. One can see the attacks of the culture of death in the culture in which we live, a culture which was founded on principles, the natural law, a culture and society that was founded upon the recognition of God, a culture and society which recognized virtue and character as values. Our society, since the 60s, has begun to lose that foundation and we see the slippery slope that we have been on.

For us as Catholics, I truly believe that that slippery slope began with the rejection of *Humanae Vitae*, with the rejection of the understanding of the gift and the dignity of human sexuality and of sexual intimacy among married couples. When that truth was rejected, we raised ourselves to be God and to be above God and said “I am the one who can decide. I can take these pills or use birth control. I will no longer trust in God.”

We have continued on that slippery slope. We can see it in the Catholic politicians today, who will say “Because of my religious beliefs, I cannot impose them on others when it comes to the dignity of human life.” Or those who sit on the Supreme Court who say we cannot legislate morality, and yet our laws against murder, against stealing, all of our laws deal with and address morality. They cannot see the fallacy of their own thinking. Any philosophy student would be flunked and given an F with some of the thinking and some of the logic of the Supreme Court justices.

We as Catholics must come to realize that we are called to have the voice of the prophet in the world today, to be those people who speak clearly the truth of the Gospel, who are not afraid to be the voice of Jesus in the midst of our world. Our Holy Father, since the first moment of his election, spoke to us as a people, “Be not afraid.” My sisters and brothers, we still must hear those words today.

We as Catholics and Americans must understand that we are very much like the people of the times of Jeremiah and very much like the people of the times of Jesus. We must ask ourselves who forms our hearts and minds. Is it the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Church or is it society, because if it is society then we too are guilty of supporting a culture of death. Our world needs more than ever Catholics to speak the truth of the Gospel.

We hear in the second reading from the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, how he speaks of love. “Love is not jealous, is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it is not quick tempered, it does not brood over injury. It does not rejoice over wrong doing but rejoices with the truth.” In speaking the truth, even though we may speak it with firmness, it must always be rooted in love. You as parents, at times, must speak with love to your children and be firm with them, because you love them, you form them. The formation is not out of hardness, it is not putting a person down, it is not tearing a person apart. It is rooted in love that one acts and proclaims the good news because we know the Gospel and the teaching of Jesus. “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” That is why love must always rejoice in the truth.

In the culture of death and in the slippery slope we have been on, we as a people, as a society, have rejected objective truth. We have said we would rather live with relativism where there is no truth and once we do that, whether we realize it or not, we are rejecting God, for He Himself is truth. As Jesus Himself says so clearly, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." The prophet is always faithful to objective truth which is grounded in love.

In conclusion then, I ask us to reflect upon the words of the prophet Jeremiah today and the words of the Gospel of Jesus. Let us pray that we may grow in our obedience to God. Let us take time this week to ask the Lord to grant us the courage to live the Gospel faithfully, to know that it is His word within our lives, for as God made the promise to Jeremiah so too does He make the promise that "I am the one this day who have made you a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass." One can see that fulfillment in John Paul II, in Mother Teresa, and in so many other courageous Catholics who proclaim the good news. Let us pray that we too may have that courage and obedience.

Second, let us beg too, for the virtue of charity, the virtue of love, that as we proclaim the truth it may always be rooted in love, that we may not seek our own interest, be quick tempered, that we may not brood over injury, but rather that we may be a people who rejoices in the truth, the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.