

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Year "A". June 22/08

(Jeremiah 20: 7, 10-13; Romans 5: 12-15; Matthew 10: 26-33)

Introduction

A man was on his way to a hallowe'en party. He was dressed as the devil in a realistic costume that included horns and a tail. Suddenly he got caught in a rain storm so he dashed into a nearby church where a prayer service was taking place. At the sight of this frightening figure in their midst people panicked and fled. One lady however got her sleeve caught on the edge of a seat and couldn't get away. So as the figure in the devil suit approached her she said: "Satan, I've been a member of this church for twenty years, but I've really been on your side all the time." Today's *readings* are about taking sides.

The *first reading* concerns a time when God's People were facing serious dangers and were divided in their views of what ought to be done. Jeremiah the prophet spoke out against the more popular view and declared clearly what God wanted the people to do. He took sides. For this he was persecuted, beaten and treated with contempt. In the *Gospel* Jesus warns his followers that loyalty to him will often mean having to take sides and to suffer persecution as a result. At the same time he promises that when death comes he will be faithful to those who stay faithful to him. Finally, in the *second reading* St. Paul shows us that taking sides is really a matter of asking what is the major social influence in our lives: Are we more interested in going along with what is popular or in being loyal to Christ?

When We Need to Take Sides

When I speak about taking sides, I don't mean that everything or even most things our society stands for are wrong. That is the view held by many fundamentalists. There is a strong fundamentalist faction in most major religions today, especially in Christianity and Islam. It promotes the view that most of the principles and values of western society are wrong and need to be resisted. This is an extreme view and is not correct. To know when we need to take a stand against popular views in our society, we should keep in mind the following three facts.

First, there are *some* principles of our culture that are wrong. For example, the tendency to look on persons simply as individuals rather than as social beings who have obligations to the social groups of which they are a part; and the view that humans find their fulfillment in what they possess rather than in what they are, are both principles rooted in faulty 17th century philosophical positions. They may be widespread and influential in our culture but they are false all the same. We need to oppose such views.

Second, freedom is, quite rightly, an important value in our culture. However it is often interpreted as a freedom to do what we wish, with law placing as few restrictions as possible on us. People tend to forget that our freedom is a freedom to become what God calls us to be. The question we need to ask is not just "what do I want?" but also "what does the truth require of me?" We need to promote a proper understanding of human freedom.

Third, thirty-five years ago less than 1% of the population of Canada reported having no religion. Today it is more than 15%. So religion is having less and less impact on the views and priorities promoted in our society.

How Do We Take Sides?

First, the positions we take on social, political and economic questions should reflect the social teaching of our faith. As Catholics we are so fortunate to have a well-developed and wise social teaching. We should do our best to become well-acquainted with it. In many parts of the world today our religious leaders are taking clear stands on social and economic issues based on Catholic social teaching. Some of the bishops of Africa have shown great courage in recent times by speaking out against the policies followed by their governments. In Latin America many church leaders, both lay and clerical, have been murdered because they stood up for the poor and tried to pursue our church's social teaching. In Canada too we have had good leadership from our bishops on social issues. It is sad that so often that leadership is ignored. The lesson for us is clear. You and I must support social and economic policies that put the dignity of every human being first even though this will often be unpopular, especially when such policies involve social programs that must be paid for by our taxes.

Second, we need to be aware how much our personal conduct every day really involves taking sides if we are paying attention to the teaching of our Catholic faith. When we do act according to our faith in our daily decisions and attitudes we give extremely important example. Again and again I have met people who were strongly influenced and encouraged by Catholic friends who were genuinely trying to live according to the Gospel, even where it was unpopular to do so.

Conclusion

Following Christ means taking sides. May we always have the courage to do that.