

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C) January 31, 2016

Reading I

[Jer 1:4-5, 17-19](#)

The word of the LORD came to me, saying:
Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you.

But do you gird your loins;
stand up and tell them
all that I command you.
Be not crushed on their account,
as though I would leave you crushed before
them;

for it is I this day
who have made you a fortified city,
a pillar of iron, a wall of brass,
against the whole land:
against Judah's kings and princes,
against its priests and people.
They will fight against you but not prevail over
you,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the
LORD.

Responsorial Psalm

[Ps 71:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 15-17](#)

(cf. 15ab) **I will sing of your salvation.**

Reading II

[1 Cor 12:31—13:13 or 13:4-13](#)

Gospel

[Lk 4:21-30](#)

HOMILY

Just before Christmas, I made a quick trip out to Walmart to pick up some gifts for the adopt-a-family project. As I had mentioned, picking up some gifts from the adopt-a-family trees was a good way to help me keep a proper perspective about what Christmas ought to mean—to remember the Gift God had given me and then to give a gift to someone in need. Adopt-a-family did help me keep perspective. I'm not sure a trip to Walmart did.

Though it's been over a month now, I'm sure you still remember that rather tense and stressed out feeling that fills Walmart and other stores during those last days before Christmas—a sense of pressure mixed with exhaustion that has the shopper just looking for the quickest possible exit from the store and the whole shopping experience—which at Walmart is through one of about 50 checkout lanes.

Having found my girls winter boots (size 6) and women's coat (blue or green, please), I saddled up in the "express lane," hoping for a quick exit—together with about a dozen other people. Suddenly, a manager came to the back of our line and announced, "no waiting in the next aisle." With a moment of "dog-eat-dog" survival of the fittest thoughts, perhaps five of us made a composed yet frantic shift to the aisle that had just opened.

There, we witnessed the savaging of a Walmart checker. For something happened to the checkout computer, so that each time the checker tried to clear the register, the infernal device just bleated back with some sound that seemed to say, "try again, you dummy." And, while the checker was beside herself, she received no consolation from the customer, who called the manager who had opened the lane and said, "can't you get someone here who knows what she's doing?" By the time the register was

fixed and the boorish customer was sent on his way, the checker was in tears. But . . . then came mercy.

The next customer, seeing how distraught the checker had become, said to her, “It’s a tough day out here isn’t it! Thanks for helping us out.” The checker, who was expected to be scolded again, looked up with a mix of confusion, surprise, and relief, and said, “Yes—I don’t usually check out—but my manager called me over to try.” She then spoke about how she was not feeling well, after which the customer again assured her he was grateful. By the time I left the line, she seemed visibly relieved from her stressful encounter with the rude customer and ready to give it another try.

Wow—look what we can do! We can be merciless, or we can be merciful. However, if we claim the name of Christian, mercy is our only option, our obligatory choice, and our calling.

The words of the Prophet Jeremiah call each of us to this mission, the same mission that the Prophet himself had received. He hears this message:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you.”

This is our mission—to be prophets! What is a prophet? A prophet is a messenger of God—a mouthpiece to speak God’s words to others. Jeremiah speaks to a defeated people, a discouraged people, a people who have felt abandoned, degraded and forgotten by God. To them, he speaks the truth: You are not abandoned or forgotten. In fact, your God has never lost sight of you. Even before you were born, the prophet says, God saw you in your mother’s womb. You are God’s special people, beloved in his eyes. Yet, in the heaviness of this sin-sick world, we have forgotten too often each other’s dignity.

The world is dying for prophets! Each person I meet—each little, discouraged, fearful, joyless person I meet—possesses a lofty dignity, a towering stature, a splendidness of God’s image, in which they have been created. This is our mission—our divinely given mission, to be voices of hope, encouragement, strength, and life others. And when we treat others with kindness and mercy, we are prophets of mercy. When others feel beaten down, our kindness does nothing less than show God’s mercy to others.

Pope Francis, in instituting this year of mercy, reminded us that the one who can show mercy is only the one who has first been shown mercy—divine mercy. Each time we come to this altar—in whatever state is our soul—the Lord always draws close and shows mercy. Mercy: that, no matter how we fail, no matter how weak we are, we are still beloved. And, having been shown mercy here, we are empowered to be mercy to others.

Life is short—we, and others, are short of life—until we are what God has created us to be: prophets—prophets of mercy. Others are longing to see the mercy of God’s love through us. This is our mission.