

The first reading from the prophet Jeremiah shows us one of the great themes of the Old Testament - how the Lord leads His people out of exile. Whether it be the slavery of the Hebrew people in Egypt or the exile forced upon them by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, throughout the Old Testament, God seeks to restore His people to their homeland and to their right relationship with Him.

As we consider the people of the Old Covenant, I can't help but feel great sorrow that our Jewish brothers and sisters continue to experience violence and persecution even in our so-called enlightened modern world. Let us pray for those victims of the shooting this/yesterday morning in Pittsburgh. May the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob watch over them and bring comfort to their families.

Listen again to how Jeremiah highlights this theme of the promised return from exile of God's people: "Behold, I will bring them back from the land of the north; I will gather them from the ends of the world, with the blind and the lame in their midst, the mothers and those with child." This was God's desire for His people, to rescue them from exile and to lead them back to the Holy Land and the holy city of Jerusalem.

This theme of the return from exile is important for us to understand today's Gospel reading. In the Gospel, we see a particular fulfillment of this prophecy in the person of Bartimaeus and his encounter with Jesus. St. Mark tells us that Jesus met Bartimaeus as the Lord was leaving the ancient city of Jericho. Bartimaeus was a blind man, sitting by the side of the road, begging. But in Bartimaeus, we can see the exiles of Israel personified. Bartimaeus was a Jewish man who was stuck in Jericho - outside of his homeland. As the great Jewish crowds made their way to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover, Bartimaeus could do nothing but remain there, in Jericho, begging for food to stay alive. Like Israel in their exile, Bartimaeus begged the Lord to save him. He cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!"

Bartimaeus was physically blind; but he had been enlightened by faith to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of David. He recognized that Jesus had the power to save him from his exile. And in this encounter with Jesus, Jeremiah's prophecy was fulfilled: "...I will gather them from the ends of the world, with the blind and the lame in their midst..." The Lord Jesus was gathering the blind man Bartimaeus back into the fold of God's people. And Jeremiah said: "I will lead them to brooks of water, on a level road, so that none shall stumble." How did the encounter between Jesus and Bartimaeus end? Bartimaeus "followed Him on the way." He followed Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, that holy city from which streams of living water would flow out to all the earth.

Through Jeremiah, God promised to return His people from exile back to their own land. And in Jesus, God fulfills this promise by healing blind Bartimaeus and leading Him on the way to Jerusalem.

But Bartimaeus is more than just a fulfillment of God's prophecy through Jeremiah. Bartimaeus is also a model for us in our own encounter with Christ. Like Bartimaeus, we too are often blind. Not with a physical blindness, but with the spiritual blindness that comes from sin. When we turn our hearts away from God to follow our own way, we are turning away from the light, we are turning toward the darkness. This leads us to blindness. Sometimes, this can even lead us to sitting on the side of the road like Bartimaeus, not knowing where to turn next. But like Bartimaeus, we have been given a great blessing: Jesus is near to us. Like Bartimaeus, we can cry out to the Lord, "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!" And in his great mercy, and in his great love, Jesus will always call us back to Himself.

This kind of encounter with Jesus happens most of all in the sacrament of reconciliation. Jesus Himself has given us this great gift of confession; and, through the ministry of His priests, Jesus Himself offers us absolution and forgiveness! And this sacrament is a necessary part of our life as Catholics. It is not some part of the Church that we can choose to neglect or ignore. Going to confession at least once a year is an obligation for us as Catholics, but even more frequent confession is better. If we wish to be holy and faithful to God, I think it is good for us to make a good confession every month. And confession is not limited to the times when we have committed mortal sins. Even if we have only committed venial sins, in every confession the Lord strengthens us to avoid sin in the future. In every confession the Lord gives us the grace we need to be saints!

The Lord desires to lead all of us out of exile and toward the promised land, toward the heavenly Jerusalem. There is no need for us to wander in the dark of spiritual blindness. Come to confession and cry out with Bartimaeus, “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me.”