

# HEARERS OF THE WORD

Jeremiah 20:10-13; Psalm 69 (68); Romans 5:12-15; Matthew 10:26-33

## So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows!!

Matt 10:26 [Jesus said:] “So *have no fear* of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27 What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28 *Do not fear* those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31 *So do not be afraid*; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Matt 10:32 “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; 33 but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

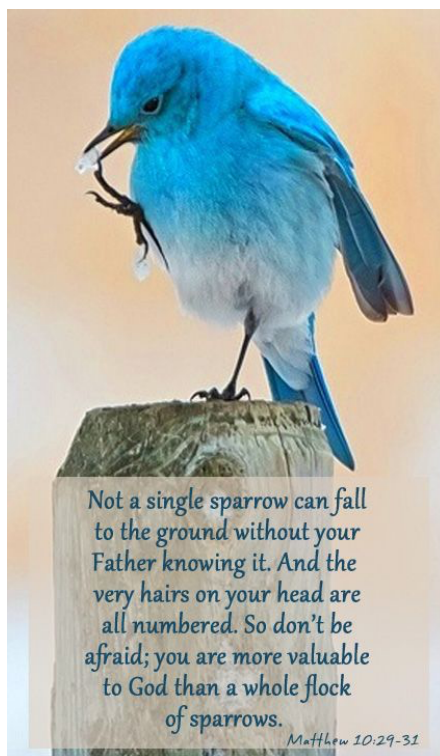
In these unstable times, fear is an understandable reaction. This can be true in society in general—the economy, politics, climate change. It can also be true within the community of faith. As we go through a time of intense pressure and overt opposition, it would be easy to lose heart. If there were a prophet among us, s/he would say to us “this is the very time to lay hold of your confidence and your joy in believing.” Even Matthew moves *from* opposition *through* fearlessness *towards* the rewards of believing.

### KIND OF WRITING

Our reading today forms part of the Mission Discourse in Matthew’s Gospel. The Discourse unfolds in several moments.

- 10:1-4 *Authority for mission*
- 10:5-16 *Core instructions*
- 10:17-25 *Future opposition*
- 10:26-33 *Fearlessness*
- 10:34-39 *The cost of discipleship*
- 10:40-11:1 *The rewards of discipleship*

It happens not infrequently that passages



of collected sayings have been laid out in a concentric pattern. This is true here, as follows:

- v. 26a Frame
- vv. 26b-27 Two sayings
- v. 28 *Central double saying*
- vv. 29-30 Two sayings
- v. 31 Frame

The physical centre is usually also the centre of meaning. The mention of father in v. 29b prepares for the full mention (twice!) of father in heaven in vv. 32-33.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The reader will notice that *three times* Matthew says not to be afraid (marked in italics above). There is an enormous background to this in the Bible. Statistics (as we know!) are not everything. Nevertheless, the admonition not be afraid occurs at least *seventy times* across the

### Thought for the day

Our times have an air of instability and everyone feels the sense of upheaval and unpredictability. Fear is perfectly understandable. Something similar may be said of our lives as believers. From a “church” point of view, we wonder who will be in church in the coming years and who will preside at the Lord’s Supper. From a personal point of view, familiar faith affirmations seem no longer as tenable as they were. And yet, at the centre of the faith project stands *not* my condition or even my faith, but all that God did for us Jesus’ death and resurrection. As Paul exclaims who will (or can) separate us from the love of God in Christ?

### Prayer

I love you, Lord, my rock, my fortress, my refuge. Help me to take hold of the hand you stretch out in Jesus.

whole Bible. Just to notice only the book of Genesis: Gen 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 43:23; 46:3; 50:19. Everybody who is anybody is told at some point not to be afraid. One may conclude immediately that there was good reason to be afraid — some kind of opposition or threat or harassment. With equal force, an unconditional reassurance is given. Both realities are constantly present.

It seems fitting to illustrate from Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

*Do not be afraid* of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” (Jer 1:8)

Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. *Do not be afraid* of them, for they cannot do evil, nor is it in them to do good. (Jer 10:5)

*Do not be afraid* of the king of Babylon, as you have been; *do not be afraid* of him, says the LORD, for I am with you, to save you and to rescue you from his hand. (Jer 42:11)

*The triple admonition not to fear is found also in Ezekiel.*

And you, O mortal, *do not be afraid* of them, and *do not be afraid* of their words, though briars and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; *do not be afraid* of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. (Ezek 2:6)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

*Both Matthew and Luke incorporate the Sayings Source (Q) into their texts. It means that the material substantially pre-dates Matthew.*

Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. (Luke 12:2-9)

ST PAUL

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we encounter death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor heavenly rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35-39)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 26** These verses follow on from vv. 17-25, which portrayed the opposition to be expected. As noted, the general admonition not be afraid is regular and in this text is expressly used against rejection and even persecution. The word for "revealed" is from the verb

*apocalyptō*, suggesting an eschatological or end-time vindication. Finally, the teaching is expressed using the parallelism of Hebrew poetry and may very well go back to Jesus himself.

**Verse 27** Here Matthew reformulated positively what the previous verse expressed negatively. Perhaps we are meant to think of the nocturnal meetings of the Matthean community. In no way is this religion (must less its proclamation) a private matter!!

**Verse 28** With this verse, Matthew addresses the question of martyrdom. Perhaps surprisingly, in contrast to the Lucan version above, Matthew uses the Hellenistic categories of body and soul. Without going down the route of a *separation* of body and soul, the evangelist's point is clear: human agents cannot destroy the life from God within. Hell is "gehenna", a valley running south-south-west of Jerusalem. It was notorious for the cult of Baal and Moloch. In the first century AD, it became a metaphor for the place of judgment by fire for all evil people, that is, hell.

**Verse 29** Matthew is not trying to frighten people into conviction or action; instead, the teaching of v. 28 leads to a renewed trust in the Father. A penny is literally an *assarion*, a very small Roman copper coin. Its value was



one-sixteenth of a denarius or less than 30 minutes wages. Sparrows were the cheapest edible bird

and yet God has each one in view. Cf., *Can a woman forget her baby who nurses at her breast? Can she withhold compassion from the child she has borne? Even if mothers were to forget, I could never forget you!* (Isa 49:15)

**Verse 30** A quite tedious, perhaps impossible task unless hair loss facilitates the counting! Cf. *And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.* (Matt 5:36)

**Verse 31** The summary repeats the injunction not to be afraid. There must be some level of wit intended in 31b. To be worth more than *many* sparrows is, we may hope, a class of understatement! Cf. *Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.* (Ps 84:3)

**Verses 32-33** Again, these verses illustrate the tendency towards saying the

same thing twice, positively and negatively. Notice the change from "your Father" to "my Father." We are indeed God's sons and daughters, but only in and through Jesus, son of Man and Son of God. The situation being addressed might sound quite contemporary: the temptation to be ashamed of one's faith. One may also notice a subtle distinction. Jesus did *not* preach himself but the kingdom of God. After his death and resurrection, the disciples proclaimed both the message *and the person of Jesus*. Finally, implicit in these two verses is the role of Jesus in the final judgement.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. 'Do not fear' is the unifying theme in this passage which is set in the context of a mission sermon by Jesus, preparing his disciples for what lay ahead. He urges them to have courage in speaking his message and living his message, drawing strength from their trust in the Father whose care for us exceeds his care for hundreds of sparrows. How has trust in God been a source of strength in life for you?

2. The body/soul terminology presupposes an anthropology in which the soul represents one's real self and the body is the perishable shell. For Jesus the important thing is to be true to one's real self, even if this does involve some material or physical loss or pain. When you have had that kind of courage, what was it like for you?

3. There is no such thing as secret discipleship. It is in declaring their allegiance to Jesus that his followers will find life. They will be the losers if they hide their discipleship. Does this resonate with your experience?

PRAYER

True and faithful God, you give courage to the fearful and endurance to martyrs.

Sustain us as followers of your Son Jesus that with boldness and conviction we may acknowledge him before the world.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

## How much more did the grace of God multiply to the many!

Rom 5:12 So then, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all people because all sinned— 13 for before the law was given, sin was in the world, but there is no accounting for sin when there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam until Moses even over those who did not sin in the same way that Adam (who is a type of the coming one) transgressed. 15 But the gracious gift is not like the transgression. For if the many died through the transgression of the one man, how much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man Jesus Christ multiply to the many! 16 *And the gift is not like the one who sinned. For judgment, resulting from the one transgression, led to condemnation, but the gracious gift from the many failures led to justification.* 17 *For if, by the transgression of the one man, death reigned through the one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ!*

Rom 5:18 *Consequently, just as condemnation for all people came through one transgression, so too through the one righteous act came righteousness leading to life for all people.* 19 *For just as through the disobedience of the one man many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of one man many will be made righteous.*

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The true emphasis in Romans 5 is not on what later tradition called original sin but rather on the extraordinary excess and superabundance of God's grace in Christ.

### CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The letter to the Romans is big in every sense. Nevertheless, the persuasive outline is relatively clear. The context is division in the Roman house churches between disciples of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. The issue at stake resembles the issue in Galatians: how much of the Jewish Law should be retained and followed? It is evident from the letter, the community itself is divided into the "weak" and the "strong." Who these are becomes clear only in the final section, 12:1-15:6. However, in 1:16-4:23 and in chapters 9-11, it is evident that each side looks down upon the other (the word despise is used). Such a division in the capital is harmful and goes clean against

Paul's vision of the union of Jew and Gentile in Christ crucified and risen.

### KIND OF WRITING

In Romans 1-4, Paul deconstructs any superiority or boasting by pointing out that both sides are equally adept at sinning and both sides stand in need of grace and faith. In Romans 5-8, Paul again deconstructs attitudes of superiority but this time by pointing out how much they both share indistinguishably in Christ. The gifts are listed chronologically: faith and salvation (5), baptism (6), the moral struggle (7) and the capacity to call God "Abba" by the power of the Holy Spirit and our unshakeable hope in Christ (8). In Romans 5, Adam is summoned up to show the universality of grace in Christ. The *sin* of Adam is evoked to underline the *contrast* between Adam's sin and the grace of Christ ("all the more so"). The comparison of the beginning, Adam, and the end, Christ, (protology and eschatology) is typically Apocalyptic. Such patterning underpins purpose, even when the end (grace) so far outstrips the beginning (sin). Cf. 1 Cor 15:21-23, 45-49 below.

NB: in Romans 5:12-19, Paul interrupts himself. The thought in v. 12 is suspended and continued eventually only in v. 18. This long suspension of vv. 13-17 makes the passage hard to grasp as Paul considers on the one hand sin, death and the Law and on the other hand grace, justification and life. It would make more sense to read on until v. 19.

### RELATED PASSAGES

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also came through a man. For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ, the first fruits; then when Christ comes, those who belong to him. (1 Cor 15:21-23)

So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living person"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. Like the one made of dust, so too are those made of dust, and like the one from heaven, so too those who are heav-

enly. And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, let us also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor 15:45-49)

### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 12** Both sin and death are universal—not because Adam sinned but because all have sinned (*pace* Augustine!).

**Verse 13** Even though there was no Law forbidding transgression there was sin — a kind of spiritual force, causing death. Cf. Gal 3:19-29.

**Verse 14** Death (and hence sin) reigned in the time between Adam and Moses, that is, even when there was no Torah.

**Verse 15** The second Adam resembles the first *in terms of universality*. They differ strikingly *in the quality of their effects*: grace far, far surpasses transgression. Paul's *style* is "all the more so" and the *content* is the astonishing gracious gift, repeatedly affirmed and insisted upon.

**Verse 16** Although Adam and Christ resemble each other in function, the difference is greater still: after *one* sin came judgment, after *many* transgressions came justification ("right relationship"). Congruence takes you only so far.

**Verse 17** The contrast continues in the consequences: death versus abundance of grace, gift of righteousness ("right relationship") and life. The "how much more" approach places all the emphasis on our new situation in Christ.

**Verse 18** At last, v. 12 is resumed: the universality of need (illustrated in sin and death) is matched by the universality of grace (righteousness and life) in Christ. "Obedience" refers to Jesus' faithfulness — cf. Rom 3:21-26.

**Verse 19** A final and, we may hope, relatively plain summary of vv. 12-18.

### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The abundance of grace: when did I become aware God's greater love?
2. All of us are put into right relationship — a pure gift, received in gratitude.

### PRAYER

Loving and ever faithful God, no words of ours can express the depth of your gifts of grace and life in Christ, so loving, so free, so abundant. May our gratitude be expressed in our lives. Amen.

# You test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind

[Jeremiah said:]

- Jer 20:7 *O LORD, you have enticed me,  
and I was enticed;  
you have overpowered me,  
and you have prevailed.  
I have become a laughingstock all day long;  
everyone mocks me.*
- 8 *For whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"  
For the word of the LORD has become for me  
a reproach and derision all day long*
- 9 *If I say, "I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,"  
then within me there is something like a burning fire  
shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot.*
- 10 "Terror is all around!  
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"  
All my close friends  
are watching for me to stumble.  
"Perhaps he can be enticed,  
and we can prevail against him,  
and take our revenge on him."
- 11 But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior;  
therefore my persecutors will stumble,  
and they will not prevail.  
They will be greatly shamed,  
for they will not succeed.  
Their eternal dishonour  
will never be forgotten.
- 12 O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous,  
you see the heart and the mind;  
let me see your retribution upon them,  
for to you I have committed my cause.
- 13 Sing to the LORD;  
praise the LORD!  
For he has delivered the life of the needy  
from the hands of evildoers.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Regularly, Jeremiah feels the pressure of his call as prophet and complains. Our reading is chosen to match the suffering predicted in the Gospel and the need for profound trust in God.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

As the book of Jeremiah has come down to us, it is in two large parts. The first part rehearses, with spiritual and theological hindsight, the downfall and destruction of Jerusalem (chapters 1-25), while the second part sows the seeds of hope of new life and restoration (chapters 26-52). Our reading, a lament, comes from the earlier, more difficult part of the book.

## KIND OF WRITING

This is an Individual Lament. There are many suggests about the structure of the entire lament and here is one.

- v. 7. Direct speech to God.
- vv. 8-9: Self reflection.
- v. 10: Plotting enemies
- v. 11: Self-reflection
- v. 12 Direct speech to God

V. 13 is a hymn-like appendix. It is not, however, unconnected. The double mention of LORD (YHWH) in vv. 7-8 is matched by a similar repetition in v. 13. The reader may notice the change of energy in v. 11, with the mention of the LORD's name in the third person. This energy evolves naturally into the second

person in v. 12. The selection in the lectionary takes us from the middle of the lament to the joyful lines at the end.

## RELATED READINGS

In the book, we find a high number of most interesting laments/confessions on the lips of the prophet: 11:18-12:6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, and 20:7-18.

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 10** Until this point in the prayer, the lament has been against God; now it shifts towards the enemies. Close friends: literally "the ones who wish me well (shalom)." Intriguingly, the vocabulary of the enemies against Jeremiah echoes the prophet's vocabulary complaining against God in v. 7 ("entice" and "prevail," underlined for convenience).

**Verse 11** The "but" marks the immensely significant change from lament to utter confidence in God. In spite of all the trouble being a prophet brought upon him, in the final analysis God is *not* Jeremiah's enemy (thank God). Following the "but," the "therefore" is also a powerful marker as the prophet foresees the consequence for his opponents. They watched for him to stumble but it is they who will stumble irrevocably.

**Verse 12** Continuing the military metaphor, the Lord is now YHWH-of-hosts (*sabaoth*). The NRSV translates the phrase (accurately) as "a dread warrior." V. 12b is actually a petition for the downfall of his enemies, that is, a prayer to see his hope realised.

**Verse 13** If original, Jeremiah is quoting some known hymn, while clearly identifying himself with the "needy" while the "evildoers" are his opponents.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Are there words and phrases within the reading with which I can identify?
2. Jeremiah's confidence in the face of adversity is very striking. Have I known such moments of unexpected faith?
3. God "tests the righteous" says Jeremiah. What have been the significant "tests" in my life?

## PRAYER

When troubles come, O Lord, help us to live them fully through faith. May we discern you in the darkness and place all our hope in you, our rock and our deliverer. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

# THE LITURGY

## Jeremiah 20:10-13; Psalm 69 (68); Romans 5:12-15; Matthew 10:26-33

### READINGS 1 AND 3

Our first reading and Gospel belong really well together. Jeremiah (along with the Psalm) could easily be used to explore our current experience of faith and its various challenges.

### THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 69 (68)—much quoted into NT and very similar to Psalm 22—is a prayer for help and an individual lament. It goes really well with the lament from Jeremiah.

### SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

#### First reading

*Jeremiah 20:10-13*

Jeremiah suffered for his faith and poured out his experience in great laments. Our reading today is part of one such confession, combining complaint with confidence in God.

#### Second reading

*Romans 5:12-15*

As listeners today, our attention may fall on words such as sin and original sin may even come to mind. Actually, this not Paul's intention at all. His full focus is on the astonishing graciousness of God to us all in Jesus.

#### Gospel

*Matthew 10:26-33*

Being a believer is tough at times and we may wonder why do we stick with it. Yet we do, because of the “immortal diamond” in Christ and God's unfailing love and support.

### WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

#### Monday 22 June

*St John Fisher, bishop, Thomas Moore, martyrs*

#### 2 Kings 17:5-8, 13-15, 18

Often in biblical history, there were invasions and deportations. In today's reading we hear of a major collapse, the destruction of the northern kingdom (Israel). Writing much later, people wondered why this had happened and they name some of the causes.

*Matthew 7:1-5*

The logic of Jesus is irrefutable and we easily grasp it; the practise of non-judgment is much harder, of course.

#### Tuesday 23 June

*2 Kings 19:9-11, 14-21, 31-36*

The success of the war against Israel encouraged the Assyrians to attack the southern state of Judah. Hezekiah the king prayed and his prayer was heard. No doubt there was more to it, but the Judeans were truly grateful and felt themselves blessed.

*Matthew 7:6, 12-14*

There are three sentences here. The second two are easy enough to grasp. The first is odd. Dogs was terms used to refer to Gentiles and so the sentences may reflect Jesus' attitude in this God: *go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*

#### Wednesday 24 June

*Birth of John the Baptist*

*Isaiah 49:1-6*

Our reading gives us one of the Suffering Servant Songs from Isaiah which give us a window on the inner life of the prophet. John the Baptist too was a prophet, with a costly ministry.

*Acts 13:22-26*

Anxiety about John the Baptism echoes through the New Testament, precisely because he had (definitely) baptised Jesus. Nevertheless, his role was subordinate.

*Luke 1:57-66, 80*

Luke is writing a kind of symbolic narrative to help the reader understand who John the Baptism was. Because followers of John continued (and still do today, amazingly), Luke underlines that John was important but not the most important.

#### Thursday 25 June

*2 Kings 24:8-17*

In our history lesson today, we hear of the last days of the kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem was destroyed and the people deported. It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this moment in the biblical story. It was a true watershed—

something like the famine in Irish history. Things would never be the same.

*Matthew 7:21-19*

Dried riverbeds (wadis) are subject of flash floods. To build there is very obviously foolish.

#### Friday 26 June

*2 Kings 25:1-12*

Today, the story is told of the catastrophic capture of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple. It may seem remote (and is!) but the importance of this event could hardly be overestimated. It led to the great exile in Babylon. It also led to a deep renewal of faith and event to a rewriting of the Bible as we have it now.

*Matthew 8:1-4*

Here's a great story illustrating Jesus willingness and desire to help those in need. It also shows him faithful to his tradition, in that the cured man needs to have his healing certified so he can re-enter society. We too can go to Jesus with the words, “If you want to, you can cure me.”

#### Saturday 27 June

*St Cyril of Alexandria, bishop and doctor*

*Lamentations 2:2, 10-14, 18-19*

Lamentations deals with the destruction of Jerusalem and deportation of the population. Today, in a magnificent lament, we hear how people felt. This is great, deeply felt poetry. When you hear it, you will see why it has often been set to music. It captures the tragedy of the human condition in one particular story but, alas, a story repeated often in human history.

*Matthew 8:5-17*

The historical Jesus met hardly any Gentiles, so it's a surprise to hear of the healing of the centurion's servant. As the story stands, it reflects the later period when Judaism and emerging Christianity were beginning to split and judgement is passed on those who missed the moment of grace.