

July 21, 2002
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

God spoke to and through the prophets, and some of those prophets, on occasion, spoke back to God. None of them did so, however, as often and fervently as Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a man of prayer.

This trait, discernible throughout the man's life and ministry, is introduced right from the opening scene in the book that bears his name. That scene, the account of his call when he was still very young, consists entirely of a conversation between himself and God (1:4-14). Such conversations between the Lord and this prophet, moreover, are a unique and distinguishing characteristic of Jeremiah among the prophetic books (cf. 4:5-21; 9:1-6; 11:1-5,18-23; 12:1-6; 14:1-22; 15:10-21; 17:12-19; 18:19-23; 20:7-18; 23:9-12; 24:1-5; 32:16-26). The prayers of Jeremiah, intense in their tone and unique in their frequency, are essential to the understanding of his message and his historical significance.

If, especially after the tragic death of King Josiah at the Battle of Megiddo in 609, Jeremiah's prayers became progressively darker, this trait reflected but the deepening shadows of his life, and these shadows, in turn, were cast by the inevitable, trampling fate that trod its way toward Jerusalem. Nearly all of the Book of Jeremiah was composed under the grim, gathering cloud that stormed forth at last in 587, when the Babylonian invader came to destroy Jerusalem and its temple. The inevitability of that coming destruction had been foretold by Huldah the prophetess in 622 (cf. 2 Kings 22:16-17), and the keenly perceptive Jeremiah discerned its taking shape in the politics and cultural life of his day.

Interpreting that approaching doom was the very substance of Jeremiah's ministry, and his prayer was integral to that interpretation. The Lord was on the point of destroying the very institutions that He had for centuries cultivated and sustained, and in the heart of Jeremiah the city's looming destruction assumed metaphysical dimensions. It suggested to his mind both the overthrow of nature and the dissolution of history. Thus, it was Jeremiah's destiny to assume the impending tragedy of Israel into the fabric of his own heart, an experience that filled him with a deep feeling of radical alienation from God. He struggled in the darkness: "O the hope

of Israel, his Savior in time of trouble, why should You be like a stranger in the land, and like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for a night? . . . Will you surely be to me like an unreliable stream, as waters that fail? . . . Do not be a terror to me; You are my hope in the day of doom."

Jeremiah's prayer was shaped, therefore, by the contours of Israel's tragedy: "Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. . . . Woe is me, my mother, that you have borne me, a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! . . . But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary of holding it back."

His was an extremely lonely life. Most of Jerusalem's citizens, suffering from chronic shallowness and terminal optimism, thought him something of an oddity and a nuisance, maybe even a public menace. They accused him (37:14), conspired against him (18:18), seized him (26:8), sought his life (11:21), struck him and put him in stocks (20:2), imprisoned him (32:3), kidnapped him (42-43), threw him in a deep pit where he nearly died from hunger (38:6-9). In short, Jeremiah was obliged to "go it alone." His was a more than ordinary personal desolation, inasmuch as he embraced a life of consecrated celibacy and asceticism as a prophetic sign of Jerusalem's approaching devastation (16:1-5).

Because the shape of his own soul was formed by his internal identification with the tragic history of his people, there was a special efficacy in Jeremiah's prayer for them. So much was this the case that on three occasions the Lord felt obliged, as it were, to order Jeremiah to stop praying! (7:16; 11:14; 14:11) It was as though the prophet's intercession was so persuasive and effective that God Himself would be unable to resist. It was largely as an intercessor that Israel later thought of Jeremiah, described in the dream of Judas Maccabaeus as "a lover of the brethren, who prays much for the people, and for the holy city" (2 Maccabees 15:14).

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