

In the Old Testament reading Jeremiah had been chosen by God to tell the King in Jerusalem that God doesn't like his behaviour and that he will be deposed, lose his kingdom and all Israel will be enslaved by a foreign power, as a punishment! Jeremiah is no fool. He doesn't expect the message to be very popular, and he is absolutely right in that!

Like many other biblical figures, Jeremiah doesn't want the job of being a Prophet. God entices him and overpowers him. Hard as Jeremiah tries to say nothing that God has given him to say to the rich and powerful, he can't avoid it: "Whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'violence and destruction!' ". Jeremiah says, "If I say, 'I will not mention him [God], 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 holding it in, and I cannot."

King Nebuchedrazzar of Babylon is making war on Israel. King Zedekiah of Judah sent his servants to find out from Jeremiah if he is going to lose or not? He wants good news: to be told that it will all be okay. Jeremiah is shunned by everybody because the message he has from God is very unwelcome. There will be defeat and exile. No king wants to hear a message like that? Eventually the King has Jeremiah lowered on a rope down into a cistern, where he sinks up to his armpits in muck! The King knows Jeremiah is of God, so he doesn't dare kill him. But he doesn't want to hear any more bad news! It reminds me of a certain president of the United States of America!

There have been such times for those Christians who stood up against the powers of evil and wickedness in the world over the last 2000 years. In our own lifetimes we can think of many examples: those who stood up against the apartheid system in South Africa, the civil rights movement in the USA (and the black lives matter movement all over the world today). We remember those who protested against the Vietnam War and people like Oscar Romero, who spoke up for justice for the poor and downtrodden in South America and was assassinated. Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who stood up against Hitler) were both killed by the powerful who didn't want to hear their messages.

It is always easier to sit and say nothing. But so many people, because of their love of God, and his laws based in justice and peace, have been unable to keep quiet. They could not stand by and watch. Many in occupied Europe and Germany during World War II looked the other way when the Jewish people were rounded up by the Nazis for slaughter. It was a much harder path for those Germans and French who hid the Jewish people and got them out of the country. Many, including Christians, just could not sit by and ignore the injustice around them.

It is hard to stand up for the truth and risk being outspoken. It takes courage that can only come from faith in God who is close at hand: "Even the hairs of your head are all counted, so do not be afraid." says Jesus, in today's gospel. He is speaking to his friends whom he is sending out, knowing that they will be persecuted for the message: about Jesus and

the coming kingdom of God. The full price of speaking the truth, was also borne by Jesus, for he experienced torture and a brutal death. He could have chosen not to go up to Jerusalem for the last time? He could have chosen to continue touring the familiar places of Galilee and healing the sick? He would have been a popular prophet, having the goodwill and approval of everybody. But he would also have failed to do God's will and to confront those who do not have the courage to stand up for God's laws of justice and equity.

The prophetic voice of Jesus has been passed to the Church and is a vital part of our ministry. So what does the Church have to say today? Some time ago I was listening to a program where they had looked at the number of people who volunteer in our local authorities. Local volunteers are essential for delivering services to people in all kinds of need from disability or vulnerability to financial deprivation. In Dudley, the voluntary sector is a vital part of making life available to so many people who otherwise, would experience a much more difficult time. One only has to think of local food banks, but there are so many other voluntary organisations throughout the borough, who serve others in ways that the local authority simply doesn't have the funding to be able to manage. The program I was watching estimated that about a quarter of the people who volunteer in their local authorities are Christians. They were wondering what would happen if that was removed? The conclusion was that many local services, that are lifelines for people, would simply cease.

There are Christians engaged at all levels of government, and in so many organisations that influence the way society looks after the vulnerable and those who are left behind in poverty of opportunity or finance. At this time of shutdown, due to the virus, unemployment and the potential loss of jobs over the next few months are huge challenges for so many people around the country. Christians throughout government, local authorities, industry and voluntary organisations are all part of trying to stop people falling into destitution. These are powerful prophetic actions and for Christians, their faith will have some sort of role in encouraging them to do what they're doing. Many in the medical profession or emergency services are motivated to huge efforts by the strength of that faith. They could choose to sit by and quietly watch, but their faith drives them to do something.

Whether we stand up against the mighty powers of government and risk assassination, or whether we work quietly and determinedly, through organisations, to bring about change for the better, or to alleviate the sufferings of the many, we are all doing the prophetic work of God. Sometimes we are called to confront the Powers, head on, which is scary, but God has counted the very hairs of our head, each of which are precious to him! He will never let us fall and be lost. Ultimately, Jeremiah was vindicated by God and rescued. God will do no less for each of us as we go about his work and face the powers of injustice in our world.