

## HOMILY – Red Mass 2015

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

I am honored (however much humbled!) to be delivering this homily to you today.

The readings we heard proclaimed a few moments ago are the very same readings that the universal church proclaims for today's Mass in this Lenten season throughout the world. Thus, they are a Word of God that is being directed to all Christians, everywhere. However, within the context of this Mass we are celebrating here in Tallahassee as we pray for judges, attorneys, law school professors, students, and government officials: in brief, persons who have been called to be ministers of justice and truth in various areas of society, this Word of God acquires a particular meaning.

Our first reading presents us the prophet Jeremiah: Jeremiah is a man that has been persecuted all his life for giving voice to the will of God. He was repeatedly sent to jail, mocked and punished; ...all because of his love for God, who, he will say, had "seduced" him.

In his prophecies, Jeremiah had been warning the people of the consequences that abandoning the justice of God would have brought upon them. He had received a mission from God who wanted to prevent the destruction of his people, and the prophet announces to them that this destruction can be avoided both through their personal conversion as well as through a change in the political direction and in the allegiances the people were forging with the foreign nations around them.

The words of the prophet were not at all appealing to those who were meant to receive them. For this reason, both the people and the rulers of Israel conspire to reduce this treasonable voice to silence! They rejected the fact that Jeremiah may have been the only one who has a word coming from God, and they chose instead to rely on other prophecies, on other instructions, on other messages, that appear to be more acceptable, more appealing, more pleasing to the ear. The people of Israel not only rejected Jeremiah; indeed they rejected God Himself who had been imploring his people to "*turn from your evil ways, each one of you, reform your ways and your actions so that you may live*".

Sisters and brothers in Christ, you all are women and men of justice; you are the ones who mete out justice every day. But your task each day has become more and more difficult; our society has clearly rejected all traditional and religious criteria of behavior, its link with God as its source and point of reference, in favor of a process of rationalization that is based upon "subjective beliefs." The consequences of such behavior, however, reach to the very core of the values we believe in and ultimately affect the essence of who we are.

When we detach law from ethics, and furthermore when we detach ethics from the divine and natural law, we all take the risks that the leaders of Israel took at the time of Jeremiah and consequently, our reason may become sick. Being sick, we need a doctor and a cure! We cannot simply dismiss those who admonish us and correct us, even though their message may at times sound unpopular and perhaps they seem to be bearers of ill fortune.

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The Gospel we have just proclaimed in some way continues to insist on this line of thought, presenting a model of life that appears contrary to our daily experience and possibly even to our expectations and desires: Jesus says “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

How do we receive these words?

What existential meaning do they have for us within the context of our concrete life situation today?

Certainly, we can say that this is what Jesus Christ has come to do Himself! And that perhaps His “advice” is not really directed at us. Indeed, you are not monks, you are not priests or bishops, you are not nuns! And yet these words of our Lord Jesus Christ want to express something that is not simply abstract advice to us or, even still, a counsel meant only for select people that are not called to live active roles in society!

The Holy Father, Pope Francis continues to insist on calling the world to personal conversion, starting with the Roman Curia and indeed reaching out to all nations. The Church has always proposed and always will propose a model of life that does not conform with the model that the world offers. A model of service, of humility, of listening to the Word of God.

The word ‘minister,’ comes from the latin word “*minus*,” that means the ‘lesser one’, the one who places himself or herself below; the one who listens to the “*magister*,” the teacher. As I mentioned at the beginning, all of you gathered here are indeed ministers in various roles of society! Today the Lord, present in our midst through the Word that has been proclaimed in the assembly, wants to remind us that we all are ministers of someone who is ‘higher’ and ‘greater’ than us: The “*magister*,” the teacher, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself!

“*Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant*”. With Christ there comes about a reversal of values. He who truly has an encounter with the living Christ, becomes a witness to the fact that what seems to be bitter becomes sweet, what is inferior is truly superior and that which seemed to be heavy indeed becomes light.

The philosopher Nietzsche had attacked both Judaism and Christianity because they exalted the value of service that, according to him, was a constraint, a limitation to the progress of humanity. According to Nietzsche the “*Jews achieved that miracle of inversion of values that led to the slave revolt in morality.*” However, Christianity takes this principle to a higher and even a more profound level: Indeed, Jesus Christ embodies what *service* really means and establishes a new moral law: “*the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

Now, Jesus did not say that we were never to be first; He never condemned those who wanted to become great. However, He showed us a different way of achieving that: ***Whoever wishes to be***

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*great among you shall be your servant.* Indeed, these words of Jesus revolutionize all human categories. Truly these words apply to every man and woman on earth, because we all have sinful tendencies of misusing the power that is vested in us for the common good, and the service of all.

If it is power that gives authority, then service offers much more: an authority that means respect and not fear, esteem and not obsequiousness, true influence on others and not fashionable imitation.

All human values, particularly those that we Americans can experience in our nation: justice, freedom, liberty, are important instruments that enable us to live in a world that can make of a human person what he or she is meant to be. However, these instruments in themselves can never be sufficient to achieve true human happiness. They are not an end in themselves. Indeed, we defend these values so that we may live to experience the deeper freedom that is discipleship in Jesus Christ, who has shown us what justice truly is. Of what use is it to achieve human justice, freedom, liberty, if then we do not use these values to seek God with our whole mind and soul and strength and to love and serve our neighbor?

We all know that the world is desperately in need of a change in direction. You are public leaders, and the steering of society, by definition, is in your hands! Your leadership must be lived as a true vocation, a calling from God to serve with justice and charity, striving for the common good, with reverence to God and to the truth that you serve, as well as utter respect for human life.

The Holy Father, Pope Francis is directing all of us in this path; a path of personal conversion and of service to others. Each one of us must take these words and apply them to our own personal life. We cannot deny that it is easier to talk about reforming political life, or attaining a higher social justice when the aim of the reform is directed to the other one and not to myself, when we speak about external social structures and not about my heart, when the one who has to change is “out there,” rather than “in here.”

Let us not fool ourselves: our lack of effectiveness in this direction will not be without consequences. Sadly, we already see this in our society, in decisions taken at the highest level that intrinsically go against natural law, God’s law and human reason. Indeed, our society needs to be renewed and this renewal must begin from our own conversion, humility and the desire to follow God, because we know that in Him there is life – eternal life -- and truth!

Perhaps this is the most difficult part to accomplish, which is why so little of it actually seems to get done. But it can be done! Let us today ask the Lord to make us turn to Him and make of us instruments of his Peace and Justice.

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