

**Twenty-Second in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Aug. 28, 2005)**

Reluctant Prophet, Hesitant Apostle

All three of our readings are about people being called and their response to that call.

Take Jeremiah, for instance, whom we heard about in the first reading. I call him the most reluctant of all the prophets. When God called him he tried to refuse. He knew what kind of treatment the prophets received because their message was frequently unwelcome, and he did not want to be a prophet. He said to God, “I’m too young.” God said, “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.” Jeremiah said, “I can’t talk.” God said, “Don’t worry. I’ll put my words into your mouth.” And once Jeremiah got God’s words in his mouth he could not *not* respond and carry out the task God gave him.

In our reading we meet him in his old age and he is complaining because, sure enough, just as he had suspected he was ill-treated. His message was not well received. Indeed there was a plot to kill him. Everything he feared had actually happened, and now he is ranting to God, “You duped me, you fooled me.” I’m told that the original Hebrew actually means, “You seduced me. And I let myself be seduced.” It sounds as though he is sorry he answered the call of the Lord when he was just a youth, yet he winds up saying that he still can’t be quiet when it comes to preaching the word of God. If he tries, he says, he grows weary holding it in. “I cannot endure it.” And so he continues to answer the call of the Lord.

In the Gospel we have a different picture. Here it is no longer a reluctant prophet. It’s a hesitant apostle. Last week we heard Peter confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And Jesus commends him for it. But when Jesus then goes on to tell Peter and the others what kind of a Messiah he will be, one that must suffer and die, Peter says, “Oh, no, Lord, that can never happen to you.” And as pleased as Jesus was to hear Peter confess that he is the Messiah, he is just as displeased with his present attitude and he utters some of the harshest words in the Gospels: “Get behind me, you Satan. You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking

not as God does, but as human beings do.”

Well as if Peter is not confounded enough already, Jesus then goes on to tell him and the others that if they really want to follow him, they are going to have to take up their crosses and share in his sufferings.

In one sense what Jesus is telling them is how the Church will be founded: through his suffering and death. But he is also telling them how it will continue to function. By imitating him. How did Jesus act? What qualities did he wish to see in his followers? First of all, compassion. His heart went out to suffering people. He fed the hungry. He cured the crippled, the blind, the paralyzed. He raised a dead boy, the only son of his widowed mother, who, without him, and without a husband, would have no one to care for her.

Jesus was forgiving. When they brought a paralyzed man to him, he said, your sins are forgiven. He taught us to pray, “Forgive us as we forgive others.” It’s not always easy to forgive, is it? I think Jesus realized that, and that’s why he emphasized it so much and gave the great example from the cross, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.”

Forgiveness, compassion, love. This is how Jesus founded the Church and this is how he wants it to continue. But for all his love he, like Jeremiah, was not well received. As he predicted, he suffered and died. And so later of course did Peter and the other apostles. When Paul says in the second reading, “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God,” he is probably alluding to the suffering that seems to come naturally to anyone who sincerely follows Jesus. Jesus tells Peter to take up his cross and follow him. Peter did not have to look for a cross. Neither do we. Crosses come naturally in the course of our lives.

The sacrifice that Paul talks about, the cross that Jesus refers to, often seem to be the price we pay for fidelity to our calling in life. Parents know this very well. It isn’t easy to raise children at any time, but perhaps more difficult than ever in this complex world of ours today. Parents who remain faithful often must make heroic sacrifices. So indeed does anyone who takes Christianity seriously. But shouldering our crosses courageously with the grace of God, acting with compassion, forgiveness, and love, as Jesus has asked us to, is the surest way to make our Church a better Church, and our world a better world to live in. That’s not a bad return on

whatever sacrifice we might have to make.