

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Pillar of Iron, Wall of Bronze

That's what the prophet is to be, in today's reading from Jeremiah. Awesome; and it is spelt out that he must *confront the whole land* – kings, princes, priests and peasants – who will fight against him, but not overcome him. Jeremiah hated fighting, as you can tell from his weary descriptions of it; nor did he have within him the instincts of a fighter – the actual *enjoyment of the fray* which makes some good people truly great, and some evil or stupid people absolutely poisonous. (The taste for gratuitous discord can be amazingly free-standing: the way rival football-fans can murder each other is a good example.) How do we know that the causes for which we lay down our gauntlet are “just wars”? How do we know that our instincts truly flow from pure sources, and not from our prejudice, ignorance, or fear?

Relationship With God

One thing which shines from Jeremiah, and from many other prophets, is the intimacy of their dialogue with God. And each example in the Old Testament is only preparing us for the intimacy between Jesus and the Father. Jesus knows the will of the Father, before he knows the effect it will have amongst human beings. The agony in Gethsemane is never in doubt: from the beginning *Thy will be done* overrides every other consideration. The long prayer in John's Gospel, at the end of the Last Supper, is a precious window into the mind of the Son as he prepares to do the Father's will. That is the ultimate truth about the struggle in the garden.

The Shock Of Failure

That doesn't necessarily prepare Jesus for the pain of rejection, or the shock when it comes to him. We do not have to believe that Mark was mistaken when he said that Jesus was *amazed at their lack of faith*; in Luke's description of the first sermon in Nazara, we can believe that Jesus will have been very shocked and frightened when they seemed ready to lynch him on account of his message. Such experiences deeply affect those who suffer them. What distinguishes Jesus is that his ministry continues in unchanged spirit, and he faces resolutely the world that has proved itself so unfriendly. It's impossible to think that Jesus didn't know the words of Jeremiah, or that he didn't draw strength from them as he faced such opposition.

What About Us?

Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God. Purity of heart is especially vital to us in our religion. It is the quality without which we cannot pray, cannot be before God, and cannot hear what he wants to say to us. *Pure* means *honest*, as pure butter is butter with no petrol or shards of glass in it. Our purity is to be what we are made to be by God, not inspired by any vain, selfish, back-ward motive. When we are praying, such things show themselves in obsessive, deaf, manipulative posturing, which we may dress up as *fervent prayer*, but which block out the listening, resting, obedient ear which Jeremiah found essential. He reminisces (20:9): *I would say to myself: I will not think about him, I will not speak in his name any more. But then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it exhausted me, I could not bear it.* The hallmark of Jeremiah's mission is precisely that he didn't want it. I think it is a good test of our campaigns and causes to ask ourselves: is there a sense in which I'm indulging in self-expression, and slapping a holy label on it to lend it dignity? Can I say the things I am shouting from the rooftops, when I am *praying to my Father in that secret place*? And does my Father say them with me, or is there a silence between us, such as might fall when we are facing away from the one we speak to, and forgetting the truth of our relationship? Faithful prayer purifies us; it consecrates us in the truth. *Fr Philip*