

Religious Freedom Week 2023: Embracing the Divine Gift of Freedom

Sunday Lectionary Notes

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time – June 25, 2023

Readings:

Reading 1—Jeremiah 20:10-13

Responsorial—Psalm 69:8-10, 14, 17, 33-35

Reading 2—Romans 5:12-15

Gospel—Matthew 10:26-33

The Cost of Discipleship

- The theme of suffering as the cost of obedience to the Lord pervades these readings. In a world devastated by sin, doing justice, speaking truthfully, treating all people with dignity, embracing the divine gift of freedom, will almost certainly, at some point, bring one into conflict with others. This may be in part because the just person, the genuinely good and truthful man or woman, provokes others by reminding them of the duties to God and to others they have neglected.
- Jeremiah reminds us of the Christian duty to speak prophetically, particularly in situations where the Gospel is mocked or rejected. In every age, the prophet has the unenviable task of shedding light on darkness, of speaking truth to error, and of expressing love in the face of hatred. The task is unenviable because of the resistance the prophet's words often attract. Jeremiah's persecutors plot against him in reaction to his righteousness preaching, which they consider obnoxious and a judgment on their disobedience to the Law. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, the Christian disciple is resisted by the world.
- Accordingly, the believer should anticipate opposition to his witness and life, which many of his contemporaries will neither understand nor accept. "You will be hated by all because of my name," Jesus says (Matthew 10:22).
- In recent years, this resistance has become especially visible in the attacks on churches, including Catholic churches and pregnancy centers, at the hands of vandals and arsonists. During Religious Freedom Week, [we pray for an end to these attacks and that all religious spaces in our country would be respected.](#)
- The Psalmist expresses in dramatic detail the hardship of the prophet: the faithful witness to the Lord suffers "insult" and "shame." He becomes an "outcast" and a "stranger to my mother's children." He endures the blasphemies hurled against God.

- Jesus emphasizes the public quality of the Christian life. By their very nature, the gifts of baptism, which configure us to Christ, cannot be kept underneath the proverbial “bushel basket” (Matthew 5:15). The gifts of faith, hope, and charity are naturally oriented to public expression as they achieve perfection when shared with others. Faith professes the truth to others; hope looks forward to a good shared with others; charity seek communion with God and others. Hence comes Christ’s command to “speak in the light” and “proclaim on the housetops”: faith is a public reality.

Take Courage

- The disciple may find resistance to the Gospel discouraging at times. The gift of faith strengthens our communion with the Lord, and we can be encouraged by hope that God’s justice will ultimately prevail.
- The Psalmist’s words help Christians give expression to this experience even today. As the target of the sinner’s hatred of God, the believer seeks refuge in the great “kindness” and “mercy” of the Lord. For those who find themselves “in bonds”—who do not enjoy the “freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21) in a social or political sense—the Lord assures their “gladness” as he “revives” their hearts.
- The resistance of the world does not excuse the Christian from living the faith publicly. While he should not live recklessly and provoke the ire of the world, the Christian ought not to shrink before the world’s hostility. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” Jesus says. Physical comfort—and even our physical life—can be put at risk when it a matter of remaining faithful to God. “Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father.” We think naturally here of the example of St. Thomas More.
- We can also be inspired by contemporary witnesses, particularly Christians facing persecution in [Nicaragua](#) and [Nigeria](#), or [medical professionals who lack conscience protections](#).
- If the Christian’s witness to the Gospel does not win the world’s acceptance, he should nevertheless maintain his freedom to live “under grace,” free from the compulsion of earthly power to betray God’s truth, goodness, and love. Only in the eyes of an unjust regime does true faithfulness to God make one an unfaithful citizen.

- In the public square, the Christian does not demand acceptance but simply freedom—the freedom to speak and act in accord with the Gospel. This freedom is just; it is due to the human being, who “bound in conscience but under no compulsion” serves God in spirit and in truth (*Dignitatis humanae*, 11). When protected by law, religious freedom benefits not only the Christian himself but also society, which can only be strengthened by the Christian’s free witness to the truth of Jesus Christ.

Offer It Up

- St. Paul presents an important teaching about redemption, which is present throughout the Scriptures. Through the gift of an individual, the grace of God flows to the many. In this instance, the Apostle is contrasting Jesus to Adam. While sin came to the many through the transgression of one man, with Christ, the one act of charity brings grace to many. The principle of the one who represents the many is an important part of Scripture.
- Through baptism, we are made members of the body of Christ, and through the Eucharist, we are joined with Christ in his act of self-offering. When we go to Mass, we, members of Christ’s body, are offering ourselves with Christ our head for the salvation of the world. Through the sacraments, we participate in Christ’s work.
- While we face resistance in the world for our Christian witness, we can bring that suffering to Mass. In the Mass, we ask the Lord to be our refuge and strength, we implore God to bring about justice, and we also offer our own experiences of suffering, asking the Lord to let his mercy flow into all those places devastated by sin, in hopes that the grace of God might move all people to embrace the divine gift of freedom.