

Temptation, Trial and Torture

(Sermon at Beaverkill Community Church, 7/2/2017)

Let us begin the examination of this subject with one of the alternative readings for this Sunday taken from the Old Testament, Jeremiah 28:5-9:

"Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; ⁶and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. ⁷But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. ⁸The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet."

Did Jesus of Nazareth meet Jeremiah's description of the true prophet?

Last week, the Gospel reading was Matthew Chapter 10 verses 24 to 39, elegantly rendered by Bob Jones. That reading contains disquieting pronouncements by the Christ, including this startling disclaimer concerning the true nature of his mission on Earth. He says:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

Now the speaker of these jarring words is the same Man whose coming was prophesied by Isaiah as the Messiah, Mighty Counselor and Prince of Peace. This is the same speaker who declared the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This is the same speaker who commands in his Sermon on the Mount: "If a man strikes you, turn the other cheek." This speaker does NOT seem to be propounding the "non-violence" of such as Siddhartha, Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. After last Sunday's service a number of us briefly discussed this passage outside and now I think a further discussion is warranted from today's reading.

Today's Gospel reading, Matthew Chapter 10 verses 37 to 42, overlaps last week's reading by three verses and continues on for three more verses. I do not know why the Church scholars of the Lectionary divide up this passage from Matthew the way they do, but it seems to me to be a continuous set of thoughts. So, let us look at the whole of this reading to see if we can discover its fuller meaning.

Bear in mind the context of this passage. By this time in his life, Jesus has grown up, likely illiterate; at the age of twelve he has amazed the priests and scholars at the temple with his precocious and astonishing learning; he has honored his father and mother at the wedding feast at Cana by turning water into wine even though such a miracle was done before his time for ministry had come. Finally, he has left His family and village to commence His ministry, recruit His disciples, teach the masses and heal the sick. His ministry has become wildly popular, bringing attention to Him, causing unrest and, eventually, the wrath of the authorities.

Thus, Chapter 9 of Matthew ends with a summary of Jesus' ministry up to that time, telling how he went from place to place teaching and healing a never ending parade of the sick and infirm. He refers to the throngs that gathered all about him as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Chapter 9 concludes with Jesus saying to his disciples that "The harvest

is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Chapter 10 then commences, starting with the issuance of orders to the Apostles to share the burden of Christ's ministry. These orders put in motion what is today called the "Lesser Commission," a commission meaning in this case an authority and a mandate to do certain acts. (It is called the "Lesser Commission" to distinguish it from the later "Greater Commission," issued by Jesus to his Apostles after his death, resurrection, and reappearance, to go out and preach to all the nations).

Thus, Jesus first calls together his 12 Apostles and gives them "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity." He instructs them to go out and preach, in this "Lesser Commission" case just to the House of Israel (not yet to all the nations), and "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons", and proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of Heaven is nigh.

Let's be honest about what is going on here. Jesus is promoting insurrection, not promoted by violence in His case, but still he is setting his followers on a fearful course of action which, to the extent of its success, will rend the fabric of the extant social order with all its vested interests. History shows us that such activities never go unchallenged, and usually end up in violence, often revolution and civil war, with its attendant suffering, death, and destruction. Jesus knew this; John Ball (in the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381) knew this; Patrick Henry (in the American Revolution) knew this; John Brown (in the American Civil War) knew this; so did Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. I should add that all these men were inspired by the Gospels in their lives' work.

You may wonder, how can anyone say that Jesus knew that violence would be the result of his orders to his followers? Well, the answer is that he says so himself. These are his next words to His Apostles:

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; ¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. ¹⁹ When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; ²⁰ for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹ Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ²² and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

So, it is quite clear that Jesus knows that His ministry and commissions will provoke violence. Moreover, when he says in last week's reading, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," it is clear as well that it is His intention to do so.

In today's reading, we also learn the consequences of correct conduct during the period of trials and tribulations that Jesus predicts. These include not just strife, suffering, and death, but martyrdom for some and salvation to eternal life for those who meet the trial. On this point Jesus says:

"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. * * * Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

This is confusing, and we have to ask what is to be done as a practical matter in our lives to resist temptation, to answer the test, to meet the trial, to achieve that sure and certain hope, to have salvation into eternal life in the glory of God's

kingdom? I, certainly, do not know the answer, and I think no one else does either.

Bertrand Russell, a prominent philosopher and atheist of the last century, justified his views in part by pointing out that, if God existed and He wanted us to follow a particular code of conduct in order to achieve a reward in Heaven, He would have told us what he expected in plain and simple language. To me, there is merit in this criticism of Christian doctrine.

Sarah Ruden recently wrote a book, *The Face of Water: A Translator of Beauty and Meaning in the Bible*, showing how alternative translations impart some surprising meanings to the Bible that are not commonly understood. In a review of the book in the May 1, 2017, *National Review* magazine, Nicholas Frankovitch remarks on a point pertinent to temptation and trial:

"Speaking of temptation: In a pithy aside, Ruden clarifies a key word whose meaning shouldn't be so misunderstood but that most pastors seem to fumble, perhaps because by training they're loath to dwell on the grim and gruesome: "Torture" is what the Greek word that gets translated as "temptation" in the Lord's Prayer would "more or less" imply for its contemporary audience. Accounts of Christian Martyrdom in our own day evoke admiration and then dread: Would I be so brave? Or would I apostatize under threat of crucifixion or decapitation? The worry was at least as pressing for the first generation Christians. Jesus gave his followers permission - He commanded them really - to beg off such a test of their mettle ("Lead us not into temptation"). It was a great leniency."

Pursuing this thought, I discovered that Jesus tells us in many places, including in the Lord's Prayer that He, Himself, prescribed, that we may and should petition and pray to God to be relieved from temptation and to be relieved from the time of trial (that is, from the time of torture). Jesus says to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, just after Peter promises the

Christ that he will never deny him, "Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial, the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Matthew: 26:41.

Being a martyr, apparently, is not for everybody, including the most ardent of disciples, but forgiveness is. And Jesus did, in His last words as a mortal man, ask God to forgive those who deny Him, because they know not what they do. Bertrand Russell's views notwithstanding, that forgiveness is a great consolation. Amen.