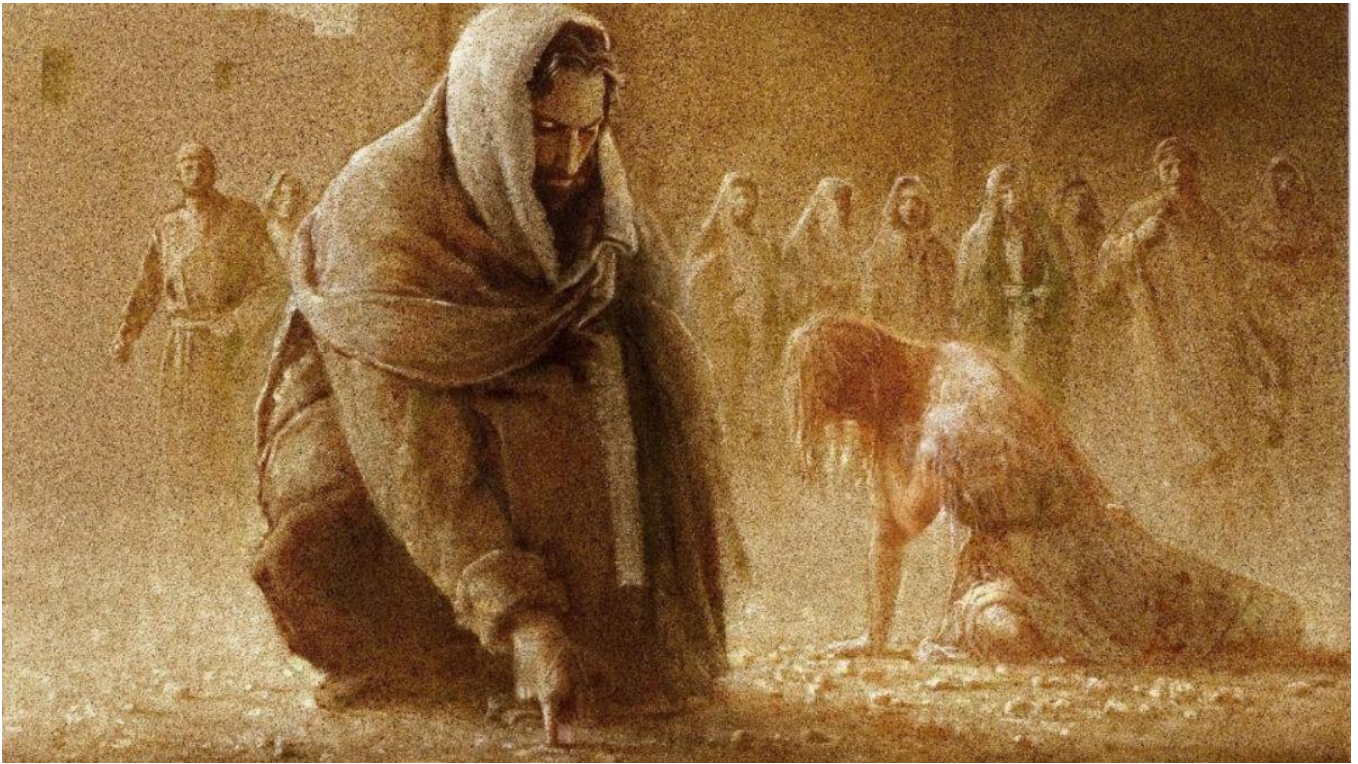


Monday 27 March 2023

## Two women accused

**Readings:** Daniel 13:1-9. 15-17. 19-30. 33-62; John 8:1-11



*“Neither do I condemn you.” (John 8:11)*

Two biblical stories placed side by side in today’s readings appear to be closely related in subject matter, but nothing could be further from the truth. The first is about a near catastrophic miscarriage of justice. An innocent woman is almost put to death by unscrupulous elders to satisfy their sinful desires. In the Gospel a woman who, according to the letter of the law, is guilty receives the mercy of Jesus.

Both women are freed from what seems like certain death, each due to the intervention of upright people – a young man named Daniel and, of course, Jesus himself. The circumstances of both women are not exactly the same. In the first reading, the woman is totally innocent of the trumped-up charge, but accused because she will not give in to the elders’ immoral demands.

The Gospel scenario may at first look the same, but this time the woman is guilty as charged. She has been caught in the act of committing adultery and the penalty for this, prescribed by Moses, is that she must be stoned to death. This is, perhaps, not as straightforward as it might seem. For a start, the woman has to be caught in the act of adultery. Secondly, the penalty of stoning is not clear either. The Law of Moses did not specify how the accused was to be put to death. But the forgiveness shown and taught by Jesus overcomes all.

### Prayer

*God our Father, may we never be swift to condemn, but always ready to forgive. May we never be so blind to our own faults that we only recognise the faults of others. Like your Son Jesus, may we be ready to accept rather than reject our sisters and brothers. Amen.*

Tuesday 28 March 2023

## Serpents in the wilderness

Readings: Numbers 21:4-9; John 8:21-30



*“If anyone was bitten by a serpent, he looked at the bronze serpent and lived.” (Numbers 21:9)*

To us, today's first reading may seem more like a folk tale than biblical text. By the time it entered the Gospel tradition, the exact point of the story had probably been lost. In the New Testament the fiery bronze serpent is only referred to in the Gospel of John, where Jesus says, “the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert”. Even the origin of the story is difficult to identify; it is as if this was a story told by Israelites but without any real idea of its origins, or its use in the religious life of Israel.

In the ancient world there was a belief that objects or items that *looked* like the part of the body or the ailment to be cured could be used to effect a cure. In today's first reading, the fiery serpents caused great suffering, so Moses crafted something in bronze (the colour of fire) to counter the fiery serpents.

Perhaps today this looks too much like superstition; perhaps that's why those words of Jesus are omitted from Gospels other than John. For readers of the Gospel, and for all followers of Jesus, there is another image, easier for us to appreciate. When we look at images of the cross, we remind ourselves that the one who died that we might live was the one who was raised up so that we may have life to the full.

### Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ, the image of the fiery serpents that caused such suffering to your people in the desert became a source of healing. As we gaze on images of you raised up on the cross, may we always remember that, in you, we too are raised up to God. Amen.*

Wednesday 29 March 2023

## Faith under persecution

**Readings:** Daniel 3:14-20. 24-25. 28; John 8:31-42



*“Our God... is able to save us from the burning fiery furnace.” (Daniel 3:17)*

Here’s a question: when is a story about the Babylonian exile of Israelites *not* a story about that exile? Well, when it’s from the part of the book of Daniel we’re reading from in the first reading of today. This passage seems to be about the exile of Israelites to Babylon between about 598 and 538 BC. It’s largely the story of three young Israelites who remain faithful to the Law of Moses all through their time in Babylon, despite threats, punishments and even bribes from their captors – or so we are led to believe.

The reality is that the tales we read in this part of Daniel were written only a couple of hundred years, at the most, before the time of Jesus. There was an invasion of Israel at this time, but it was not the Babylonians who invaded but the forces of the Hellenistic king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who reigned from 175 until his death in 164 BC. The books of Maccabees tell something of the story of his persecution of the Jewish people. Today’s first reading, from that time, was written to inspire Israelites to follow the example of Daniel and his friends hundreds of years earlier.

Books like Daniel were written to give courage and confidence to those suffering under invaders, or those who were taken into exile. These stories might prompt us to ask: how much do we stand up for truth in our own day?

### Prayer

*Father in heaven, help us always to stand up for those who are oppressed and persecuted, and to be witnesses to the truth, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Thursday 30 March 2023

## Trusting in God's promise

Readings: Genesis 17:3-9; John 8:51-59



*"Here now is my covenant with you." (Genesis 17:4)*

It was enough to give Abraham a psychological complex. He was once known as Abram – meaning "father", of the extended family of which he was head – except he was a father figure with no children to call his own. You can just imagine the gossip: "Calls himself father and hasn't a child of his own to take his name!" Was this an additional impetus to leave his tribe? Was God's promise that Abram would be the father of a great nation just too good an opportunity to be missed?

The reality was that Abram *almost* obeyed God, who told him to leave everything and follow him. Yet he did the very human thing of making his own provisions despite God telling him to leave everything and go to a place God would show him. Abram and company resembled a small moving city, rather than a lone traveller.

The Abram story is a model to consider during Lent. Abram obeyed God, but brought his own backup plan – nephew, possessions, livestock and so on. Does Abram remind us of our own Lenten journey? Do we set out to follow the ways of God... but take an insurance plan with us? God had asked Abram, later called Abraham, to leave everything aside and go to a place God would show him. How could we use Lent to increase our trust in the God and Father who gave his Son that we might live?

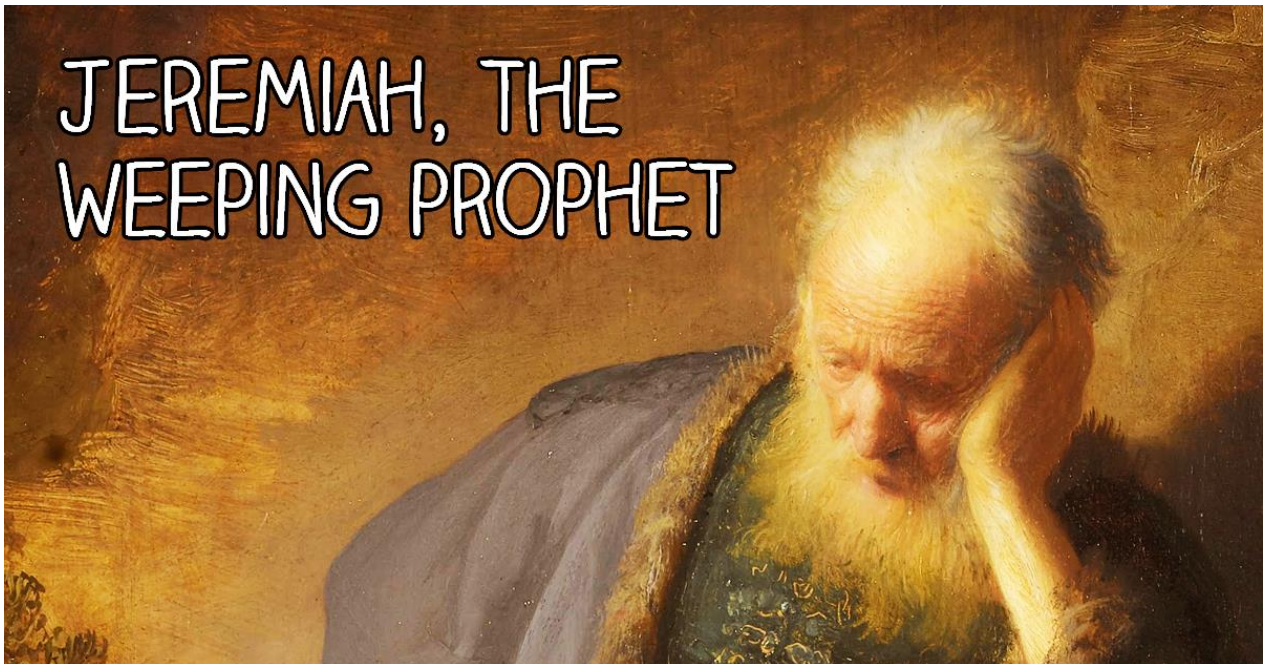
### Prayer

*Lord and Father, may we learn this Lent to trust you, just as your own Son trusted you despite the shadow of his own death hanging over him. Amen.*

Friday 31 March 2023

## The prophet Jeremiah

Readings: Jeremiah 20:10-13; John 10:31-42



*"I have committed my cause to you."* (Jeremiah 20:12)

From the time of his commission by none other than God, Jeremiah tried to avoid what he probably knew was inevitable: like all prophets, he would suffer through the exercise of his ministry. For Jeremiah, the reality of rejection – perhaps even death – was never missing. Jeremiah was a minor priestly figure in the Temple, so he saw how corrupt the institution had become. He also realised that if he uttered a word of complaint – which he was required to do as God's prophet – he would be made to suffer, perhaps even be killed.

The Jeremiah era coincided with the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Babylonians. The history of this period was turbulent. The monarchy was corrupt; the Babylonians destroyed everything in their path and took thousands to their own country.

Despite his misgivings, Jeremiah tried to persuade Jewish leaders to remain faithful to God who had brought them to their own land. There is a sad twist in the tail of this saga. There came a time when Jerusalem was emptied, and its inhabitants taken to Babylon. By this time Temple priests realised Jeremiah was not their enemy. They took him with them to Egypt.

The difficulties he encountered, as described in the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, have prompted scholars to refer to him as "the weeping prophet".

In many ways Jeremiah's fate points us indirectly to the inability of people to remain faithful to the teaching and promises of God. Each one of us is called in some way by God. How do we respond to our calling?

### Prayer

*Lord God and Father of us all, you have called each one of us to serve you in some way. Help us to hear our call, and to respond to it in faith, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Saturday 1 April 2023

## Priestly prophecy

Readings: Ezekiel 37:21-28; John 11:45-56



*"It is better for one man to die for the people." (John 11:50)*

There's no lack of drama in the Gospel of John in the events prior to Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. In this last passage before Holy Week, the drama is intensifying. Jesus had caused yet another stir by raising Lazarus from the dead, and many Jews who had witnessed this reported to the Pharisees what Jesus had done. Of course, word reached the chief priests, and Caiaphas, the high priest. Caiaphas expressed the opinion that it was better that one person should be put to death to avoid the total destruction of the nation. The Gospel writer indicates that this was Caiaphas speaking as high priest in his prophetic role.

This prophetic utterance came from an individual who was known to be corrupt through and through. It was considered that the office of high priest could not be corrupted, even if its holder at the time was corrupt. In effect, this meant that even the corrupt Caiaphas was capable of prophesying when he carried out his function of high priest.

The rest of the story is yet to come, but the evangelist gives us a preview of what will happen: Jesus *will* die for the people of Israel and for the unity of the children of God.

On Good Friday, we will listen to John's account of Jesus' passion and death in full. For now, the evangelist gives indications of what lies ahead. Let us reflect on this as we prepare for Holy Week.

### Prayer

*God our Father, as we prepare for Holy Week, help us to walk with your Son, Jesus, through the days ahead, that we may grow ever closer to him. Amen.*