

Death and Life

God never gives up. And neither should we. Today=s first reading is from the book of Jeremiah, a prophet scorned in his own time, a prophet who had to be spirited out of town in the dead of night to avoid ending up dead on the street the next morning. And yet what does God speak through this unpopular prophet? ALet me try again. This time I will write my law not on tablets of stone but on the very flesh of your hearts. This time you will not need to look to others to instruct you, this time you need only look within, into the quiet recesses of your own heart. @

Jesus appears as a second Jeremiah, another prophet scorned and persecuted by the religious authorities, persecuted for not holding to the official line. But Jesus will not skip town in the dead of night, on the contrary, Jesus will arrange for his own arrest in the dead of night. Tradition has it that Judas betrayed Jesus, but some scripture scholars are now wondering whether Judas was not actually following a plan hatched by Jesus himself, to get himself arrested, to bring the building crisis with the religious establishment to a head. He certainly talked about getting arrested. He certainly provoked the authorities to arrest him, parading into Jerusalem as a Messiah, creating a scene in the temple quoting Jeremiah=s own condemnation of the temple priesthood for having turned his Father=s house into a Aden of thieves@, even prophesying its destruction.

Whether a matter of divine foreknowledge or human planning, its with an eye to what is about to unfold that Jesus meets the curious visiting Greeks, Jews of the diaspora who want to find out for themselves what all the rucus is about. What they find is a prophet talking about the wisdom of holding life loosely, the folly of defending your life at the cost of betraying your values, the power of dying that true life might bloom, bloom like wildflowers the desert after the rain, bloom like the spring fields of grain. For the value of life is not to be found in hoarding it in granaries, but in sewing it through empty, fallow fields. The value of life is not to be found in protecting it, but in risking it, not in holding it close to one=s breast, kept safe, clean and pure, but in giving it away, profligately, like a spendthrift, for one finds that life, like love, only multiplies the more it is spent, that the more one gives, the more one has to give, that ironically the way to really lose one=s life, like the way to lose all love, is to try to hoard it, keep it all to oneself.

Life is less a fact than a choice. And so too death. There is a way of living that is really a kind of death, and a kind of dying which is really a way to live. As the poet says, we can be a long time a-dying. We can spend a whole life dead to what makes life worth living in the first place. Life takes faith, for it takes taking risks, reaching out, being vulnerable. Life takes hope, for it takes answering that call sounding in our hearts. And, of course, life takes love, for it is only in giving that we truly receive, only in reaching out that we can be reached ourselves, and only in dying to self, that we truly come to life in the arms of another.