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CAN YOU STAND BY YOUR CONVICTIONS?

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chaps 20-22

Extracts:

Now Pashhur the son of Immer, the priest who was also chief governor in the house of the Lord, heard that *Jeremiah prophesied these things*. Then *Pashhur struck Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the high gate of Benjamin, which was by the house of the Lord. And it happened on the next day that Pashhur brought Jeremiah out of the stocks. [But] Jeremiah said to him ... "Thus says the Lord, 'I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall carry them captive ... and slay them with the sword. Moreover, ...you, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. You shall go to Babylon, and there you shall die, and be buried there, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied lies'"* [Jer. 20: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6]

On Tuesday, 18 July 2006, the United States Senate passed by 63-37 a bill to loosen restrictions on federal funding for stem-cell research.¹ According to scientists, stem cells could be a renewable source of replacement cells and tissues to treat Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, spinal cord injuries, diabetes, strokes and burns, among others. Right from his assumption of duty in January 2001, President George Bush had made it clear that he opposed spending tax payers' money on stem-cell research that was based on deliberate destruction of human embryos. However, with strong lobby from the scientific community and very favourable public opinion, both houses of Congress moved to pass bills that favoured loosening restrictions on federal funding. The vote had strong support from Democrats and high ranking Republicans. However, barely a day after the Senate vote, President Bush vetoed the bill because it "crossed a moral boundary." The attempt by the House to override the veto failed (235-193).

George Bush took a decision that was very unpopular and could cost his party critical votes during the mid-term elections in November 2006. Why did he take such a risk? Why did he choose to stand by his convictions? In today's Bible text, Jeremiah faced a similar challenge to defend his prophetic ministry and he stood by it. Can you like President Bush or prophet Jeremiah do the same thing, no matter the cost? That is the issue that we shall address in today's lesson.

¹ "Bush vetoes embryonic stem-cell bill," www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/07/19/stemcells.veto/index.html

1. What you stand by depends on what you stand on!

In the Parable of Two Builders [**Matt. 7: 24-27**], Jesus spoke of two persons who built their houses on two different foundations. Both houses faced the *same* rains, floods and winds but only one of the two houses survived. The one built on a foundation of sand collapsed and “great was its fall.” The other house did not fall because “it was founded on the rock.” The lesson we learn from that story is that the platform or foundation that we stand on to a large extent determines what we stand by. So, what platform do you stand on? Are your convictions based on exigency or solid truth?

a) *A platform of exigency*

When our views or positions are influenced by self-interest or the desire to do what is popular or politically correct, irrespective of the morality of the issue(s) at stake, we are standing on a platform of exigency.

We live among family or friends, colleagues or associates and so on. There is hardly a human being who wants to be alone. That was why in the garden of Eden, God Himself said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper *comparable to him*” [**Gen. 2: 18**]. That comparability may take the form of marriage (as in the case of Adam and Eve), friendship, political or professional affiliations and social, religious or cultural group memberships, etc. In such groups, there are shared values and norms, which may be derived from traditions or religious beliefs, among others. Within each group, we call some people conservative, that is, those who insist on maintaining the *status quo*, no matter the changes over time. At the other extreme, we have people that are called liberals and progressives who want the group values to change in response to changes in time. The bottom line is that the majority of the contestants are driven by a desire to be on the winning side. Therefore, there are no absolute standards of right and wrong. The benchmark is ever shifting, depending on what position can win more votes or advertisement dollars or social respectability.

A good case can be found where Paul made his defence before King Agrippa [**Acts 26: 1-30**]. The truth of the gospel of Christ had earlier been demonstrated on Pentecost Day when almost three thousand new converts were baptized in one day [**Acts 2: 41**]. It was reinforced with the dramatic conversion of Paul on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians [**Acts 9: 1-18**]. Following the demonstration of the power of God when Paul and Silas were put in jail in Philippi, the jailer and his household gave their lives to Christ [**Acts 16: 25-34**]. Therefore, by the time Paul was brought before Governor Felix and King Agrippa, it had become fairly well known that the story of Christ’s resurrection was fact, not fable. After Paul had made his persuasive speech, laced with the testimony of his own

conversion, in spite of his earlier hostility, Agrippa replied, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian” [Acts 26: 28]. In other words, Agrippa stood by his convictions even when they were based on error because it was not politically correct for him to do otherwise. Even during Christ’s earthly ministry, “many rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees, they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue, *for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God*” [Jn 12: 42, 43].

Some of us find ourselves in such situations. For example, we may be holding on to error because of human pride or for fear of losing face or status. The Jews who instigated riots against Paul in Thessalonica did so out of self-interest but they lied to the ignorant mob by saying, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. . . . all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king-Jesus” [Acts 17: 5-7]. Many Christian couples have headed for the divorce court (even when deep down in their hearts they know that they are scripturally in the wrong) because society and their churches have condoned it.

b) *A platform of truth*

Some people anchor their convictions on the truth, irrespective of if or whether others share the same position with them. They are like the house built on the rock. Since they are anchored on truth, they suffer more hardship but in the end, their position is vindicated and respected.

For example, Daniel, a Jewish exile in Babylon, had risen to political prominence and was made one of the three governors under king Darius [Dan. 6: 1-2]. Out of envy, the other governors and top officials conspired and got the king to make a proclamation that only the royal statue erected by the king be worshipped for a period of thirty days and whoever refused to do so should be cast into the den of lions [vv. 3-7]. Soon after the law had been signed, Daniel went to his own home, opened the window of his upper room, and facing the direction of Jerusalem (where Solomon’s temple once was), “he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, *as was his custom since early days*” [v. 10]. In other words, Daniel stood by his convictions, but how are we sure that he was right and everyone else was wrong?

For defying the king’s order, he was thrown into the lions’ den but he came away unhurt. However, when his false accusers were thrown in, “the lions overpowered them, and broke all their bones in pieces before they ever came to the bottom of the den” [vv. 16-24]. With Daniel’s convictions so proved right, the king issued a decree that “in every dominion of (the king’s) kingdom men *must* tremble and fear before the

God of Daniel. For He is the living God, and steadfast forever (whose kingdom is the one that shall not be destroyed” [v. 26].

Compare that with the failure of Korah’s rebellion against Moses [Num. 16: 1-35]. Moses was the acknowledged leader taking the children of Israel through the wilderness. Korah and his 250 co-conspirators, “representatives of the congregation, men of renown” did not see why Moses and Aaron should exalt themselves “above the assembly of the Lord” since “all the congregation is holy, everyone of them, and the Lord is among them” [vv. 2, 3]. That pitched Moses and Aaron against the rest. So, who was right in his convictions?

Moses proposed that God be allowed to decide who was His and who was holy. Each of them should come before God the following day with his censer. When the fire of God descended, the ground split open and Korah, the co-conspirators “and all those with them went down alive into the pit (and) the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly” [vv. 4-33]! Moses was vindicated. He was the one standing on the platform of truth.

What *general principle* can we learn from the forgoing? It is that *only God knows the truth* [Deut. 29: 29; Jn 1: 17]. If our convictions are based on human values or standards, we are on slippery slope. But if they are anchored on the word and truth of God, we can stand firmly and withstand the heat that follows. Let us see how this principle applies to the case of Jeremiah in today’s Bible text.

2. Jeremiah stood on the word of God

In today’s story, we see the prophet Jeremiah pitched against Pashhur, the priest and “chief governor in the house of the Lord” [Jer. 20: 1]. That is equivalent to Jeremiah being against the whole establishment, namely, the state and the religious leaders. You can be sure that public opinion was much in their support and against the prophet whose stand was unpopular and politically incorrect.

Pashhur had heard the series of unfavourable prophecies against the state, king and people of Judah. The most recent one went like this [Jer. 19: 15]:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Behold, I will bring on this city and on all her towns all the doom that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks that they might not hear My words.’

If you think that people in authority enjoy such critical statements, see how President George Bush of the United States recently reacted against a news publication by the *New York Times* on the war in Iraq. The reaction had nothing to do with whether the story was true or false. Rather, the newspaper’s audacity

allegedly threatened national security! In Nigeria, unknown security agents “from the Presidency” raided the premises of the independent *African Independent Television* (AIT) to remove tapes of a documentary on the futility of past leaders’ attempts to elongate their stay in office beyond their constitutional mandate. At the time, the AIT was carrying live the debate of a similar matter in the National Assembly, to the chagrin of the Presidency which allegedly supported a constitutional amendment to have a third term. So, don’t expect anybody to welcome your criticism of their actions with open arms!

Pashhur had Jeremiah arrested. He struck the prophet “and put him in the stocks” [Jer. 20: 2]. That is a painful experience. Here is what Pashhur did to Jeremiah. He felled timber and cut holes in it where Jeremiah’s head, hands and feet were securely fastened. He left him in that painful state *overnight* [v. 3]. Presumably, the purpose was not merely to show the kingdom’s anger against the messenger but to influence him to change his mind. When security forces apply harsh treatment against detainees, it is mainly to extract information which they may allegedly be withholding.

The following day, Pashhur brought Jeremiah out of the stocks but Jeremiah remained unrepentant. He stood by the word that God had spoken to him, namely, that God had given “all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall carry them captive to Babylon and slay them with the sword.” More specifically, Pashhur and his household and friends that he had lied to would be among the exiles, and he himself would die in exile [vv. 3, 4, 6].

With the matter now beyond the king’s officials, king Zedekiah himself sent Pashhur and Zephaniah the priest to request Jeremiah to “inquire of the Lord” for him, whether God would send Nebuchadnezzar away from Judah “according to His wonderful works.” Jeremiah sent back an even more sarcastic answer- there was no remedy for the king and his people. God had already delivered them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar [Jer. 21: 1-14].

Jeremiah paid a high price for standing by his convictions. He was “in derision daily” and everyone mocked him [Jer. 20: 7]. Nevertheless, he was undaunted because the Lord was with him “as a mighty awesome One” and his detractors stumbled and could not prevail against him [v. 11]. In due course, Jeremiah’s prophecy was fulfilled. He in deed stood on a platform of the truth of God.

3. Conclusion: Stand on Christ!

To stand by your convictions is honourable and ultimately rewarding. In history, we remember Nelson Mandela but hardly those who had perpetrated apartheid against people of his colour. Mandela paid a huge price by spending close to thirty years in solitary detention but he came out triumphant and a champion of multiracial harmony. George Bush may escape the pain of his solitary position on stem-cell research because he is not seeking re-election. Jeremiah also had a

terrible time for holding on to his integrity but he prevailed. What is common to all these people? They all share an abiding faith in the truth of the word of God as a platform to stand on.

We know that “at various times and in various ways,” God spoke in the past to us “by the prophets.” But in these last days, He has “spoken to us by His Son,” Jesus Christ [**Heb. 1: 1-2**]. This same Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life” and *no one* comes to the Father except through Him [**Jn 14: 6**]. Therefore, if you stand on Christ, you are standing on the truth of God. When you stand on that platform, you can stand by your convictions without worrying about the world.

Given the huge price tag that goes with standing by your convictions, make sure that:

- Your stand is continually right by God

If God is not the author and promoter of your convictions, you may not be able to carry your fight to the end. So, continue to renew your mandate with God so that you do not stumble along the way. Note how Jeremiah carried on, “His word was in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding back, *and I could not*” [**Jer. 20: 9**].

- Pray without ceasing

Your real enemy, the devil “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” [**1 Pet. 5: 8**]. Therefore, you must learn to pray without ceasing [**1 Thes. 5: 17**], just as Jeremiah and the other people of the Bible did.

If you want to wear the crown of God’s glory, you have to *first* carry the cross of His dear Son. Know the truth and stand by it!