

Life Is a Paradox Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time/A August 31, 2014
10:45 AM **Jer 20:7-9; Rom 12:1-2; Mt 16:21-27** (Struggle to find God's will and carry out the good we can do.)

“Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

You could be forgiven for thinking that **today's readings on the whole are somewhat of a downer**. In the first reading **Jeremiah** is quite disturbed, angry at God really and at himself. **“You duped me, Lord, and I let myself be duped.”** That's someone upset with himself as well as with God. **Jesus in the gospel is afraid that Peter has turned against him. “Get behind me, Satan! You are not thinking like God.”** You are not helping me any. You are becoming an obstacle to what I have to do. And **St. Paul was afraid that his flock in Rome**, that he had done so much to nurture, was actually losing the faith because they were conforming themselves to this age. **They were allowing the world around them to influence them too much.**

Now there is a **common theme** throughout these readings and that is that **life is a paradox**. On the one hand, it is absolutely delightful, wonderful, good, and we are here to, yes, enjoy. That's true, but it's only half the truth. The other half is life is very difficult. It is a challenge. There are a lot of heartaches and, yes, we must learn how to suffer. **“Those who save their lives lose them; those who are willing to let go of their lives gain them,”** the way the gospel puts this paradox. Both sides are true and both sides are from God. **God really wills us to live in a good world.** He wants us to enjoy it. He wants us to prosper, **and yet he also wants us to choose God above all goods, and that involves suffering.** It involves trials. It involves tribulations.

There are, after all, evil people in the world. Jesus had in his own life just heard about the death of John the Baptist when this story is taking place. And that changed Jesus. It made him a little withdrawn, a little more sober, a little more reflective, and now he started thinking about what he had to do and what he had to suffer. Peter and the others really didn't want any part of it, naturally. Who does? But the fact is **there are evil people in the world who will stop at nothing to get what they want, and that is an obstacle to those who want to do what is good and right and just and be holy.** For every Bobby Kennedy there is a Sirhan Sirhan. For every Martin Luther King there is a James Earl Ray. For good, peaceful, and just people this is a problem. They are at a serious disadvantage because good, peaceful, and just people have **forsworn the use of violence that is so handy to get what you want and which the evil will use.** So in a way, life is stacked against the good. This is the perplexity that Jesus is dealing with and so is St. Paul and so is Jeremiah: how **life is stacked against the good.**

Does that mean the good will be overcome? Well, no, it can't mean that. So what? What's the answer? **For Jesus** the answer was not in words. It was to offer his entire life to the Father. **He made of his life a sacrifice to the Father.** He put his total trust in the Father. **St. Paul is urging the same thing. “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.”** What he means is

live out the Cross in your life. And he calls that “spiritual worship.” A living sacrifice is spiritual worship as opposed to, in contrast to, what? The dead animals offered in the Temple. They weren’t living sacrifices. They weren’t spiritual worship either. They were simply offering dead animals to God. Now this living worship, this spiritual worship is actually **making one’s body the temple of God, and letting God radiate from within a person.** That’s spiritual worship à la St. Paul. That’s offering your body as a living sacrifice. Let God radiate from you into the world.

But this is no small task. It requires searching for God’s will. That’s the second part of Paul’s letter. **You have to search for God’s will.** You have to be transformed in the search for God’s will by a renewal of your mind, not be overcome by the world. Paul presupposes that **we can use reason to find out what is really good, pleasing, and perfect. It may require trial and error.** It’s okay to make mistakes. But Paul was confident that human beings can discover what is good. They don’t have to just take what they are told. They can actually figure it out. That’s what he is talking about. This means **unlearning a lot of what we have already learned from the world and letting God teach us something better.** This means we don’t take in the endless messaging that is constantly coming at us from so many sources. It means we make room for the word of God, and of course we probably won’t always succeed. Paul didn’t always succeed. The saints didn’t always succeed. They erred. They sinned. They fell. But they kept going. They kept **struggling to find God’s will and to carry out the good they could do.**

And that’s the key, to carry out the good we can do. Nobody can win the whole war. Nobody can or is expected to save the whole world. But **we are expected to do the good we can. And that we have to discover soberly, wisely, intelligently.** What can we do? Whatever we can do, we need to do it. Sometimes, however, we are like Peter, who says, “That will never happen!” We don’t use the reason God gave us. We just go with our thinking that has been formed by the world. **Jesus points out that ultimately all schemes of self-preservation will fail. “Those who save their lives will lose them.”** And that’s all part of the mix. That’s the way God has created the world. In the strangest way it’s for our best. **Life on earth is temporary, and yet an important opportunity to cooperate with God in doing God’s work.** This is the greatest reason to rejoice and be thankful because serving God makes life worthwhile and leads to ultimate happiness.