

22ND SUNDAY A 2008

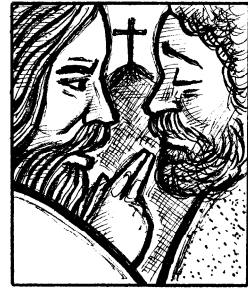
AUGUST 31, 2008

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JEREMIAH 20:7-9

ROMANS 12:1-2

MATTHEW 16:21-27



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A biblical concordance is a huge reference book in which every word that appears in Scripture with the exception of articles, prepositions, adverbs and conjunctions, is listed with the book and verses in which they appear in the entire Bible both Old and New Testament. I mention this not simply to give you another piece of useless information but because the reading from *Jeremiah* has always fascinated me because of the use of the word “duped.” It is not a word that I, and I suppose you use very often, and within the Bible it appears only four times, twice in *Genesis*, once in the *Book of Judith*, and here in *Jeremiah*. To me the word seems a bit archaic, something I might find in the script of a melodrama. As a matter of fact dupe or to dupe comes from the French word *duppe* probably coming from the phrase *de huppe* or “of the hoopoe” an extravagantly crested and stupid bird. In any case “dupe” has come to mean a stooge, a fool, and a sucker. As a verb it means to deceive, to trick, to delude, or even to swindle. The Hebrew word here is *pata* which means to seduce and often has sexual connotations. Neither our stock meaning nor that of the Hebrew seems to capture exactly what Jeremiah is saying about Yahweh in our reading. Perhaps Jeremiah is saying both. His complaint is a typical one found on the lips of many of the prophets: God’s call is too much for him to resist, and if we want to call that seduction so be it. That prophet’s call, seduced or overwhelmed as he may be by it, is not something that he can escape, even if in the eyes of others he seems to be a fool and a laughing stock. So like lava boiling beneath the surface of the earth, the Word of God he has been called to proclaim comes forth as from a volcano, unpleasant for both the speaker and for those who hear his words.

The obvious reason for the choice of our *Jeremiah* reading this morning is found in our Gospel from Matthew. It is the continuation of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, but here we find Peter painted in a much different light than last week’s reading. Peter the Rock, who has confessed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Lord, now begins to rebuke Jesus because he does not like the words He now speaks that the Messiah must suffer greatly, be put to death by the authorities and then rise. One might gather that Peter sees Jesus as some sort of dupe, a fool for saying such things about the Messiah that the people of Israel have so long awaited. Jesus’ replay, however, “Get behind Me, Satan” makes it clear that Peter is the one

who is being duped, the one who is being taken in by Satan as an easy mark because he prefers his concept of the Messiah over that which Jesus says must be.

The bad news does not end there, however, Jesus goes on to say, “Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.” While Jesus speaks about the need for His own death, He now tells His followers that they too are to take up their “cross.” While we may look on the Cross as an object of veneration, that was not the case among Jesus’ contemporaries. For His disciples and indeed for the entire Roman world, the very mention of the word “cross” might justly lead them to shudder in horror.

If a Roman citizen was condemned to the death penalty, St. Paul for instance, they died by the sword. Death by crucifixion was reserved for foreigners and for slaves. While not invented by the Romans, the Persians can take credit for that, crucifixion became an art as a tool of the Roman Empire. It was an efficient and extremely painful way of death, and therefore taught a lesson to those who might resist the power of Rome. For Jesus to tell His followers that they must take up their cross must have been more than difficult for them to hear. The twelve must have begun to wonder exactly what they had gotten themselves into, for this was not the kind of Messiah that they or Israel expected. The expected Messiah was to be full of power and free Israel from the bonds and domination of any foreign power. Although the Gospel does not indicate it here, the Apostles must have been in shock not only by Jesus’ revelation about Himself, but also about what was expected of them. They were to take up their cross and follow Jesus. There must have been great deal of psychological denial going on within the apostles until Good Friday when their denial must have turned to outright fear as they saw the reality of Jesus’ prediction.

Paul, just years after Jesus’ Death and Resurrection, never stops proclaiming the Crucified and Risen Lord. He sees his individual cross as a badge of honor since it is a sharing in the suffering of Christ. Therefore, we are not surprised to hear him tell the faithful in his Letter to the Romans this morning to “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” He is not necessarily speaking about martyrdom here, but conforming the Christian’s moral life, our moral life, to God’s Will. To offer our bodies as a living sacrifice means that through our redemption in Christ we have been freed from worldly standard. Our hearts, our minds, our bodies, our will all that we are should now be in tune with God’s Will, and therefore manifested in our conduct as we bear witness to all Christ has done for us.

Proud to share our cross as a sign of our belief in Him.

So this is what it means to be “duped” by God, to be “duped” by Christ Jesus. If we are honest with ourselves we begin to recognize just what we have been given in this Christ. He is

the Messiah but not a political one. He frees us not from the power of the Romans, but from the bondage that sin has exercised over the human race from the time of our first parents. If we truly understand this, then we should understand something of what Jeremiah was feeling in our First Reading. He tries to resist God but the force of God's Love is too much for him. He was truly seduced by God.

This is exactly what St. Ignatius of Loyola faced when he came to understand God's love for him especially in the gift of his son. As Ignatius puts it in his contemplation, to attain love knowing all that he has been given, his only response is to give all back to God. In other words, make himself entirely available and at the disposal of God. At our best, which I am afraid is far too seldom, that is what we Jesuits try to do. But such a response is not only expected of men and women who live the vowed lives of religious. It should be the natural and supernatural response of all Christians. Blessed as we all are with the graces that constantly flow from our God, we are all also sinners. You know it as well as I do. We are selfish, perhaps not all the time since we can sometimes be heroic in thinking of others before ourselves. Our petty weaknesses often carry the day in our relationships with others as well as our relationship with God. It's easy, very easy to think first of old number one. Isn't that after all how it is supposed to be? Isn't the law of nature all about the survival of the fittest? When we start thinking about number two or number three, don't we put ourselves in danger? If we believe in Christ, even if our faith is weak we know that our belief should commit us to following His Word. "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

Well no one, especially Jesus, said that following Him would be easy. To do so we must be convinced that it is only in Him that we find life, the fullness of life and happiness. While that may not make it any easier, we at least know in our hearts what we are striving for. Perhaps, Ignatius' prayer, his *Suscipe*, said every morning might help us to keep in mind not only what we have been given, but that for which we were created. *And, to realize that being "duped" by God is a grace.*

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess, You have given all to me. To you, O Lord, I return it. All is Yours, dispose of it wholly according to Your will. Give me Your Love and Your Grace, that is enough for me. Amen