

Reflection for Liturgy of the Word
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Jeremiah, Jesus and Ignatius of Loyola. A powerful triad of teachers!

They speak to us as conduits of the sacred from the source of their lives – God alone – but their identities and purposes were challenged because of the beliefs, views and needs of those around them.

Scholars refer to Jeremiah as a “prophetic book” that “sears the soul, challenges the conscience, and promises hope to the wounded in body and spirit.” The era out of which this book was written was not unlike today. It was a time of turmoil and upheaval with direct impact upon human and theological understanding caused by the military and political events of that time. Judah was invaded by the Babylonians three times. There were multiple regime changes that divided Judah into factions. The destruction ruined city walls, the palace and the temple.

There was significant loss of life, and thus the “ordinary domestic, social, and economic life of the people was destroyed leading the nation to question its relationship with its God. Deeply troubling questions arose. Had God forgotten the chosen people? How could God allow such devastation? Had God turned away from the covenant at Mt. Sinah? Was God powerless over the very powerful Babylonian armies? Would the survivors have a future?”

These are the haunting concerns in the Book of Jeremiah. Questions that reveal a belief that God is responsible for their circumstance.

The theological intent in this writing is to “defend God from the charges of injustice or weakness” in the fall of Judah; the “national tragedy as the result of human sin rather than Divine caprice or weakness.” Israel’s failure to listen to the prophets arose as the central reason for its demise. Today’s reading opens with God clearly laying out the change of heart, mind and behavior required as Jeremiah pointed the way toward restoration and affirmed that God would bring them into a future full of promise.

Prophetic pronouncement is often difficult to hear. The agitation ignited deep emotions, defensiveness and resistance in those to whom Jeremiah addressed God’s instruction. God was supposed to be different, a powerful protector for the people, but the message of this prophet put the onus on the people – a responsibility that if abdicated would be to their ruin.

The reaction to Jeremiah was to threaten him with death. Our current times seem to mirror these events and the subsequent question of “where is God in all of this?” The prophetic response might be: *Where are you, the people, in all of this?*

Today's Gospel reading reveals another difficulty derived from seeing and believing. The story showed the difficulty in Jesus being known and understood for who he really was as opposed to the identity inherited in relationship to his family and trade.

Jesus was prevented from having impact because the people of his native home could not see the Jesus who existed outside of their original experience. How often does this happen in our lives, that we have difficulty letting others be more than our memory or experience of them? What do we cling to so easily about others that prevents us from knowing them as they truly are?

So, we come to the Feast of St. Ignatius, who has influenced IHM life, prayer and spirituality. I was a mere 22-year-old when I made my 30-day retreat using the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius beautifully guided by Sister Martha Rabaut. That was my first encounter with Ignatius of Loyola. There is so much that can be considered for reflection about Ignatius, but I want to share a story written by Jesuit Ron Darwen in a 2008 article in *Thinking Faith* titled "Will the Real Ignatius Please Stand Up?"

Apparently, the image of who Ignatius was as depicted in the original Autobiography as dictated by Ignatius in 1567 was recrafted in the 16th century. Image mattered to the Jesuits, and Ignatius' portrayal in the Autobiography was not in keeping with how they wanted their founder to be seen.

A new biography was written in the aftermath of the Council of Trent and was marked by the ethos of the Counter-Reformation and its aggressive stance toward Protestantism. The image of Ignatius was changed into the "the great soldier saint, a swash-buckling derring-do, minor aristocrat with an exaggerated sense of chivalry, injured severely by a cannonball in a battle with the French at Pamplona, a clerical Errol Flynn to inspire young Jesuits by fervorina from their novice masters to imitate a heroic knight."

In the 19th century, another version of Ignatius was introduced, one that depicted him as stern, more than a little inhuman, a soldier, militant, militaristic, a martinet expecting prompt, unquestioning execution, proposer of blind obedience, not given to feeling or affection, rational, a man of ruthless willpower, hard endurance, or sensibility – if at all, stern control, heroic.
(Joseph Veale, SJ)

Then, thankfully, the rejected image offered in the Autobiography was rediscovered and shifted Jesuit self-understanding by connecting with Ignatius as the man of prayer, someone with extraordinary capacity or sensitivity to his interior life, keenly aware of the motions of the spirits, good and bad, able to taste the sweetness of the Trinity even in the most challenging of environments, gifted with visionary insight that created a wealth of apostolic opportunities aimed at helping others to experience Jesus Christ as he had. A man of feeling given to tears, a spirit of soaring imagination, a dreamer with sensitive self-awareness, attentive to the subtle movements of his sensibility, a man of strong affectivity with a gift for friendship and affection, a companionable person.

(J. Veale, SJ)

What Ignatius tried to do for people was to introduce them to how God speaks directly to the heart. Today, Ignatius is best known as a mystic. His true genius lies in the way he handed over his destiny to those mysterious but profound experiences in which he knew God to be calling him. Ignatius as mystic replaced the soldier-saint. He was both a doer and a mystic. The challenge lay in holding together a spirituality that does justice to both. Today's invitation from Ignatius is to deepen the integration of prayer and action.

In the words of Jim Corkery, SJ: "Jesuits live out of an awesome grace that tilts us toward seeing the world with the eyes of Christ, loving it with his heart, and serving it with his compassion. It is not a matter of meeting needs, doing good, acting justly alone. Nor is it a matter of having faith, praying, living contemplatively alone. Rather, it is a matter of doing both together."

Today, we embrace the impact of seeing and believing in three separate stories. What the Israelites believed about God shaped their reaction to Jeremiah and the situation they found themselves in; what the hometown folks believed about Jesus shaped his capacity for impact there; and the image the Jesuits needed to have projected about Ignatius shifted over the centuries until claiming the person rendered in the Autobiography of 1567.

Belief can shape how we see. How we see can shape our beliefs. There is no more important time to own this than right now. Let us be guided by Jeremiah, Jesus and Ignatius as we seek to be prophetic in our seeing of the world with "the eyes of Christ, and loving it with his heart, and serving it with his compassion." In God's grace, may we be true contemplatives in action.

Resources:

Give Us This Day –

The New Interpreter's Study Bible – Abingdon Press

Will the Real Ignatius Please Stand Up? Ron Darwen, SJ 2008