



peace than through this kind of deeper understanding and a compassion that placed him and his fellow workers with all who suffered.

If we can cultivate that kind of compassion, then we become true peacemakers. It means seeing more deeply and finding all the ways we can to be with “our poor people,” with all people, in truth and compassion.

Being prophetic people also means resisting the temptation to escape. The last verse of our reading is important: “O that I had in the desert a traveler’s lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them!” How honest! Isn’t there a little cabin in the mountains I can get to and leave all this awful stuff?! The desire just to give up and escape. It is good news, I think, that Jeremiah is so brutally honest about his feelings. Wouldn’t we rather just give up on it all and retreat to our small, comfortable lives where we won’t be disturbed by what we see going on? Where we won’t have to go to the trouble and struggle of being compassionate people? Where we can just sit back and lob our great ideas and solutions at the world without sharing the suffering?

Jeremiah understood that there is no escape from life and its painful realities. The only way is to embrace it all, everything that comes to us, and to develop our compassion more deeply. Far from taking off for that little desert hideaway, Jeremiah made a decision. He chose to stay in Jerusalem with the people, to go through with them what they had to go through. He chose to stay and help rebuild. From that point Jeremiah’s message moved from judgment to hope. Being prophetic means you know when to say the right word, when to speak the hard words of reality and when to speak the soft words of encouragement. In seminary language, there must be the pastoral as well as the prophetic ministry.

I think here of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s decision in June 1939 to leave the safety of the U.S., where he was studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York, to return to Germany. He knew what was coming and he knew also that, in his words, “I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.” (Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 559.)

Being prophetic people means being compassionate people, willing to understand that difficulties must be faced and born by oneself as well as by others. This is true also for our personal lives. Just as we are to be compassionate toward others, so we to be compassionate toward ourselves as we embrace those difficult things in our lives. Not to try and escape them. Not to pretend they are not there. But to deal gently and lovingly with ourselves so that we may go through what we must go through. Only this way can we ready ourselves for the new life that can come.

And this is the last point: To be prophetic means that we prepare ourselves through honesty, deeper understanding and compassion, to receive the new movements of God’s spirit. It is a spiritual paradox that we must learn how to become empty, how to embrace those things we don’t want to embrace, so that we can then be filled with what God wants to give us. If we are going to be prophetic people then we need to do the difficult spiritual work it involves. There are no shortcuts. Whether the painful realities are political, religious, social or personal, we must embrace them and feel the pain of them. When we stop trying to avoid or deny, then we can become inwardly calm and peaceful enough to see more deeply into those difficult experiences and understand them. In this way, we exercise compassion toward others and ourselves. Not condemning. Not rejecting. But accepting and being with all who suffer and our own suffering.

We cannot do this if we are not on that inward journey, doing the daily work of prayer, cultivating silence, study, and reflection. Here is the only place I differ a bit with Jeremiah. I think there is a little desert place in which we must take refuge. It is the solitude in which we can come to deeper insight, where we can identify and embrace our suffering and that of others with compassion, where we can listen more and more deeply. This is not escape or denial. It is the kind of retreat that keeps us from bolting the situation altogether and getting lost in the wilderness.

I hope that you hear good news in these anguished words of Jeremiah. The importance of facing and embracing the difficult and painful experiences of life. The compassion that we can have toward others and ourselves. The wisdom of not escaping these things but using them to prepare ourselves for the new, for the healing that God will bring. We see this all in Jesus and the way he calls us to follow him. His perceiving and naming of the things that were wrong and causing suffering. His compassionate solidarity with both those who suffered injustice and those who perpetrated it, with the poor and the rich. His identification with suffering as he went through rejection and even death because of those who would not face the truth about themselves. But in it all, his remaining rooted in God, trusting that God would bring new life.