

Homily for January 31, 2010 (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)  
*Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30*

In Dostoevsky's classic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, a wealthy woman asks her *staretz* or spiritual advisor, Zosima, how she can really know that God exists. The *staretz* responds that there is no satisfactory explanation except in the practice of "active love." He assures her that ultimately there is no way other than love to know God in reality, as opposed to God as a mere idea.

The woman confesses that she sometimes dreams about a life of loving service to others. She considers becoming a nun, living in holy poverty and serving the poor in the humblest way. The thought of such a life can move her to tears. But then she thinks about how ungrateful some of the people she serves may be: they'll probably complain that their soup isn't hot enough, their bread isn't fresh enough, their beds too hard, and their covers too thin.

The woman confesses to Zosima that she couldn't bear such ingratitude. As a result, her dreams about serving others have faded away and she again finds herself asking if God really exists. With compassion as well as directness, her spiritual guide tells her: "Love in practice is a hard and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

In today's scripture readings we experience that truly *living* love can indeed be "a hard and dreadful thing." It is especially hard when we are called to speak and act prophetically. Jeremiah, of whom we hear in our first reading, was given the task of being Israel's prophet of exile. Over the course of a 40-year ministry, the message that the Lord gave him to preach was a lot heavier on death and ruin than on hope (see, e.g., Jer 1:10-16).

Like many prophets, Jeremiah initially sought to escape his calling, protesting that he was too young (Jer 1:6). God insisted, however, promising to support him: "Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you says the Lord" (Jer 1:8). With that reassurance, Jeremiah pressed on with fulfilling the mission that God gave him, despite the times he felt severely tested and overwhelmed (see, e.g., Jer 15:10-21, 20:7-18).

Following in the prophetic traditions of Jeremiah, Isaiah and many others whom God sent over the centuries to call his people back to faithfulness to their covenant, Jesus began his public ministry proclaiming a message of hope and liberation that also challenged his hearers to

personal conversion. As all authentic prophets eventually discover, it was a message that not everyone welcomed.

Today's gospel reading picks up where last week's (Luke 4:14-21) left off. Everyone in the synagogue is not only "amazed" but also quite content to hear Jesus' "gracious words" – that is, until he challenges their own lack of faith and prejudices. When he chides them for their skepticism ("Isn't this the son of Joseph?") and asks them to stretch their own capacity to love by recalling that God had long ago showed mercy toward gentiles like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, they want to throw him off a cliff! Yet, rooted in his own love, he walks through the midst of them.

Lest we think that living in love is a test only for extraordinary people like prophets and saviors, our second reading reminds us that it is no less a challenge and duty in ordinary, everyday life. Having eloquently described the diversity and interdependence of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ, the church (1 Corinthians 12), St. Paul turns toward the animating spirit behind those gift, the *sine qua non* of charism and ministry: love.

He expounds on the qualities of love, both of its presence (patience, kindness, honesty, forbearance, belief, faith, endurance) and of its absence (jealousy, pomposity, arrogance, rudeness, selfishness, quick-temperedness, resentment, crookedness). While this is among the most popular scripture passages for celebrations of marriage, its import is universal. Take some time over the next week to read and reflect again on this passage. It makes for a wonderful examination of conscience. Love, after all, is not the sole province of the married any more than holiness is the sole province of the ordained or professed religious.

Nor is love something static, an object that we can possess. Using the image of a mirror Paul points out that we grow in Christ's love and wisdom throughout our lives and even into eternity. To grasp the full meaning of this metaphor, it is important to recall that mirrors in Paul's day were quite different than those we have today. Back then they were typically sheets of polished metal, not glass, and thus subject to distortions of light, shape and color. So it was not hard for the Corinthian church to grasp the underlying message: in this world and in this life our understanding, like our love and ourselves, will always be imperfect.

But that shouldn't stop us from striving to fulfill what Jesus called the two greatest commandments: to love God with all of our mind, heart, soul and strength; and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mk 12:28-34). +