

God's Big Mouths - Part I: The Prophet Jeremiah

(Editor's Note: This title is taken from Peter Kreeft's book "Understanding the Old Testament.")

In the opening number of the musical **1776**, John Adams repeatedly bellows in the halls of the Continental Congress the refrain "Vote for Independency" while the Congress bellows back "Sit down John!" Finally one member yells in desperation "Will someone shut that man up!" "NEVER!" John Adams thunders back, "NEVER!" The "big-mouth" of John Adams helped bring about American independence. Almighty God has His "big-mouths" also: known as the Prophets of the Old Testament and the Apostles and Church Fathers of the New Testament. Instead of political independence, they help us achieve independence from sin, the true freedom. This will be a two-part article that will feature God's big-mouths from both Old and New Testament: the Prophet Jeremiah from the Old and St. Athanasius from the New.

The prophets of the Old Testament are both individuals and an institution in the Kahal (Assembly) of ancient Israel. Their writings form an entire section of the Old Testament and the Maronite Catholic Church, along with the other Eastern Christian Churches, celebrates the feast days of the individual prophets. In looking at the lives of these men you will find common threads which form the institution of prophecy.

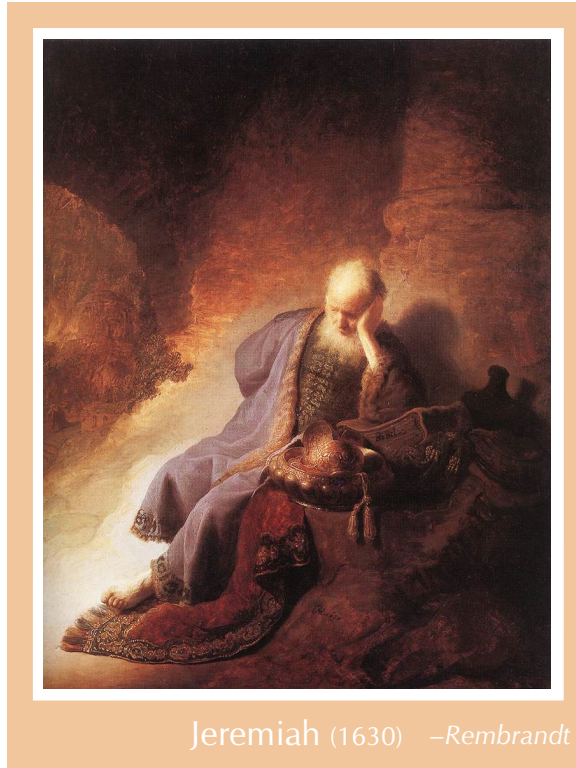
Each prophet received an individual call from God and virtually each one responded with a "why me?" To say that they were reluctant would be putting it mildly. Elijah prayed for death, Isaiah felt great unworthiness, and Jeremiah himself would come to literally curse the day he was

born. All experienced rejection from the community at large and from the political and religious leadership of ancient Israel. These men had to be made of pretty stern stuff to accept this vocation. So why would they accept a calling that their own instincts prompted them to reject and which would entail trouble with both religious and political leaders, not to mention the general population. The answer comes in the next characteristic of prophecy.

The prophet was acutely conscious that he was speaking God's Word and he had to deliver it the way he received it. So absolutely convinced that it came from Almighty God Himself, they delivered that WORD with the full knowledge of the consequences that would entail: rejection, unpopularity, persecution, exile and perhaps death. They could have easily avoided all that unpleasantness by doctoring up the message: a little se-

lective editing. But they would not, precisely because they knew that this was not their word nor were they sharing their religious experience; instead they saw themselves as letter carriers, not as editors.

This essential aspect of prophecy reminds us that God's Word has been throughout Salvation History an unpopular word. As the ancient prophets experienced great hostility in proclaiming that word, so too today, God's Word continues to experience great unpopularity. The Magisterium of the Catholic Church continues that mission, only in a new format. Almighty God's Revelation ceased with the death of the last Apostle (St. John) so there is nothing new to add (or change) to the deposit of Faith. What the Magisterium does is to hand on that WORD



Jeremiah (1630) —Rembrandt

in its integrity as it received it. *“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you:”* (I Corinthians 11:23). Like the ancient prophets, the Church knows full well that this is not Her Word but the Lord’s and must faithfully deliver that WORD no matter how unpopular it might be. As the ancient prophets experienced the temptation to alter (nuance) that Word for popularity’s sake, so too the Magisterium experiences great pressure to “be realistic” or “with it.” Many Christians today don’t want to hear that WORD. Instead, many want some good ideas and advice on how to deal with daily life and its challenges or an affirmation of our current lifestyles: something that makes us “feel good about ourselves” — the ultimate criterion today. Therefore many hurl the same epithet at the Magisterium that was hurled at John Adams: “Will someone shut those old men up!” With this we are reminded that fidelity to Christ will cost us. *“In the world you will have tribulation;”* (John 16:33) Which brings us now to the person the Prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was probably a direct descendant of the priestly family of Eli who had been custodians of the Ark of the Covenant at Shiloh in the days before the Philistine conquest; he was to live to see the Ark, then enshrined in the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem, destroyed forever as he had prophesied. When Jeremiah appeared on the scene much had already altered the religious landscape. The people had forsaken the Covenant with God and sought to “mainstream” themselves with their neighbors going so far as to adopt the ancient version of the Culture of Death — child sacrifice. A hole would be cut into a statue of the Canaanite deity Baal, a fire stoked, then a child would be thrown live into the fire. Several of the Kings of Israel and Judah sacrificed their own sons in this manner. The children were sacrificed at the Canaanite shrine known as “Tophet” located *“in the deep valley of Ben-Hinnon which, most appropriately, was to give its hellenized (Greek) name of Gehenna to be one of the names of Hell.”* (Warren Carroll “The Founding of Christendom”). The prophets had constantly warned that Almighty God would not be deaf to the cries of these slaughtered children. For its persistence in this sin, for its refusal to heed the prophets God sent and to repent, God engaged

in some downsizing of the Chosen People. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was obliterated by the Assyrians and the 12 Tribes reduced to 2: a 83% reduction. Almighty God expects to be obeyed. He will be patient for a time to provide the opportunity for repentance but a Day of Reckoning will always come.

Jeremiah now has to inform the King of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) that their Day of Reckoning had arrived. He spelled it out by delivering God’s Word. *“For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, says the LORD; they have set up their abominations in the house which is called by my name, to defile it. And they have built the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when it will be no more called Topheth, but the valley of Slaughter...And I will make to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness...for the land shall become a waste.”* (Jeremiah 7: 30-34) When you hear Our Lord in the Gospels speaking about “the fires of Gehenna” keep that image in mind.

Jeremiah had to deliver that message. No wonder he would come to curse the day he was born! God would now permit the emerging Neo-Babylonian Empire of King Nebuchadnezzar to conquer them. They should submit to him and his rule since as a vassal state they would still be permitted to keep their institutions and have some local autonomy. But the King rejected it. He summoned Jeremiah and asked him to speak “the WORD OF THE LORD.” Jeremiah read that word from a scroll. King Jehoiakim listened attentively to the reading of the whole scroll. As each three or four columns were read and finished, he took out a knife, cut them off and threw them in a fire burning before him. He then gave orders that Jeremiah be arrested, but Jeremiah had by then vanished. The Babylonians came shortly and the new King Jehoiachin, along with all the leading officials and some 30,000 people were deported to Babylon. Several years later, the new king Zedekiah planned a revolt. Jeremiah warned him not to. *“Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve*

him and his people, and live.” King Zedekiah reacted by having Jeremiah put into a large cistern (mud pit) and was urged by his advisors to kill him. The Babylonians came again in 589 B.C. This time the entire city was destroyed, the Temple (with the Ark in it) destroyed. The king saw his 5 sons slain before him, was blinded, and lead in chains along with the majority of the remaining population. A 60 year exile lay ahead.

The Prophets show us that God does intervene in human history. If we persist in keeping our

immoral “modern” culture along with its “Culture of Death”, then a Divine punishment will be inevitable. Just read the history of the Chosen People. “What you sow, you will reap” is a constant theme of Scripture. Let us always heed the Lord as he speaks to us through his Vicar, our Holy Father the Pope along with the bishops in communion that through our fidelity we may enjoy the blessings that God bestows upon those who do His Will. ✠