

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time
August 14, 2022
Year of Saint Joseph

“And so they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Prince Malchiah, which was in the quarters of the guard, letting him down with ropes. There was no water in the cistern, only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud.” (Jeremiah 38:6)

In our Old Testament reading from the Book of Jeremiah, we find the prophet trapped in a muddy cistern unable to help himself. He has no choice but to wait there, in the mud, until another lowers the ropes down to rescue him. For our reflection today, let us ponder a question concerning the moment and how it could apply to us: “What if Jeremiah did not reach for the ropes and instead remained in the cistern?”

Let us begin to answer this question with another question. Could a pet owner become so accustomed to the smells associated with owning a pet that they no longer notice the smell? It may not be until another, someone unaccustomed to the pet smell, mentions it for them to acknowledge the smell exists. Now, modifying our original question, can we propose this as an acceptable alternative: “Jeremiah having become accustomed to the mud, the damp, the dim light of the cistern, now accepts this (life in the cistern) as his reality and may fail to recognize the ropes as his means to freedom?”

I believe it safe to say Jeremiah would not accept the cistern as his new way of life. I further conclude he would have reached eagerly for those ropes. Why? I arrive at this conclusion because Jeremiah had been outside of the cistern prior to his being in the cistern. He had been above ground. He had seen the sun in its glory, shining brightly. He had tasted food and drink, which were denied him in the cistern. Jeremiah knew all of this for this was his history. It was this history which, not only reminded him of what he had lost, but also urged him on to stretch for those ropes.

Now, let us change his history. What would happen if Jeremiah had never known life outside of the cistern? Would he have known to reach for the ropes that day? I think he might have found them curious, a new thing to his environment, but never something to be grasped and clung to for the salvation of one’s life.

Applying all of these thoughts to both myself and you, are we too living in the mud and the muck of the cistern? Are we failing to grasp the means for our own escape? From Plato’s Allegory of the Cave to the Matrix movie, mankind has struggled to answer this particular question. No matter how we may address the question, movie or book, it still remains – Am I truly alive or am I merely living? This is a question much greater minds have attempted to address. It is particularly concerning in our days, due to the rising number of baptized Catholics who no longer practice the faith. Their ever-quick

responses could be summed up with the statement – “They believe they have Faith, but they do not need Religion. And who are we to challenge that belief?” Short answer, we are those who challenge because we are those who care. It is this caring for the needs of the other which inspired Ebed-melech to go ask permission and lower the ropes to save Jeremiah. It is this caring which impels both priest and parents to both encourage and warn those under their care of life’s pitfalls. I encourage all of us here today to grasp for the ropes which have been lowered from heaven by the One who seeks to raise us up for our own salvation. His ropes are present all around us at this moment. Ask Him, your guardian angel, your Confirmation saint, all the saints in Heaven, and all holy men and women, to pray that you and I may come to know the difference if we are in or outside of the cistern. And, we may come to see which ropes have been lowered to lift us up and which are only meant to drag us down further into the pit of despair.