

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Every once in a while a phrase comes along in the Scriptures that, at first, might catch you off guard, just by how it sounds. It might be a particular expression or even just one word that makes you think to yourself, “What on earth does that mean?”

Well, at least speaking for myself, one of those phrases was used in our first reading today. Here, we see the young Jeremiah struggling with the fact that God is calling him to be a prophet to God’s people and to the whole world. He knows that the Lord is calling him to do something really challenging; and as a 19-year old – more or less was his age – he’s just not sure he’s up to the task. And so God reminds Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.” God continues: “But do you gird your loins; stand up and tell them all that I command you.”

Did you ever wonder what that expression, “gird your loins” really means? Well, I decided to do a little research on this one. To understand this phrase, we first have to understand a little about the ancient Israelite culture. The essential garment for the Jew was the tunic – basically an alb, like myself, the Extraordinary Ministers, and the altar servers are wearing – a robe. As you can imagine, the tunic would be fine for walking around in. But if you ever had to run or do some serious work, it could pretty easily get in the way. And so to give a man greater range of motion, he would tuck the front hem of his tunic into his belt to get it out of the way. It’s from this custom that the expression “girding your loins” comes from, since a person would gird, or make ready, his loins, that is, his legs and thighs, for work or battle.

So, what does readying oneself for work or battle have to do with Jeremiah the Prophet? Well, over time, “girding your loins” came to be used as a metaphor for preparedness – demonstrating that a person was ready for service. A modern-day translation of this expression might be something like “rolling up your sleeves” – you hike up your sleeves to better get into the task at hand. Well, in the case of Jeremiah, God is saying: “And you, Jeremiah, are you starting to roll up your sleeves to get started with the mission I have called you too? No. You’re still sitting on your keister. So, get up and get to it!”

I think there's a good message here for all of us. And I don't think it's too hard to see. Many times, we find ourselves with different thoughts and hopes and dreams about the things we'd like to do – both in our personal lives, maybe in our professional lives, and should be the case in our spiritual lives as well. Perhaps it's something like going to Confession after years of being away. Or maybe it's working towards an annulment and getting your marriage convalidated, or blessed, by the Church. Perhaps it's working to overcome a particular sin or rekindle a broken or damaged relationship.

The point is, is that we each have stuff to work on and grow through. And one of the principles of the spiritual life is that there is no staying still – there is no maintaining the status quo in our spiritual lives. We're either actively doing something to grow in our faith, or we're regressing, as we hold on to the hopes of “one day” getting around to it. Now is the time for girding your loins! It might not be convenient, as was the case for Jesus in today's Gospel – I'm sure He would've just preferred not to preach to those people of His hometown, who dismissed him as simply “the son of Joseph”, the carpenter. But that was precisely the time for Him to do God's will – right then and there, not later and somewhere else.

And so, just as people in biblical times would gather up their long robes and tie them around their waists so they could move quickly and freely, so we need to do whatever it takes to focus our thoughts on those things that allow us to serve God completely and without hindrance. May the holy Eucharist, the very Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ, give us the grace to gird our loins in order to do God's will now. God bless you.