

Rev. Derek Fairman

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time C (Source of Strength)

In the first reading, from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, we hear about the harm that Jeremiah's enemies inflicted upon him by lowering him into the cistern full of mud. Ebed-melech, a court official, had pity on Jeremiah and pulled him out of the mud. This was all because the prophet Jeremiah spoke the truth about what was going to happen to the city of Jerusalem.

In the psalm, we heard that the Lord heard the cry of the Psalmist. The Lord set the feet of the Psalmist on firm ground. The Psalmist was also grateful to the Lord for looking upon him with pity. "Many shall look on in awe / and trust in the Lord." We may not know the exact circumstances in which this psalm was written, but obviously the Psalmist spoke about the Lord rescuing him, which is a theme that occurs repeatedly.

The city of Jerusalem was sometimes associated with the Lord's protection. Often in ancient warfare, an invading army would force the people living in the countryside into the cities. The invading army would decimate the surrounding country so that the people who were trapped in the city for refuge could not eat from the produce of the land. For the people of Judah, they sought refuge in the city of Jerusalem during such a time. They recognized a unique relationship between God's protection and the city of Jerusalem.

Psalm 48 is a psalm that praises this unique relationship. "God is in its citadel, / renowned as a stronghold. / See, the kings assembled, / together they advanced. / When they looked, they were astounded; / terrified, they were put to flight! / Trembling seized them there, / anguish, like a woman's labor, / as when the east wind / wrecks the ships of Tarshish." The psalm describes the beauty and splendor of Jerusalem, but also that the city is victorious over all the enemies who come against it. It is the Lord who provides this protection to Jerusalem, so that the city not being conquered reflects the Lord's victory over all His enemies.

While the Lord remained in the Temple, the city of Jerusalem would remain safe and be a refuge for all the faithful. The problem was that the kings, priests, and people had brought idolatry into the city, because they made various treaties with other nations, so that the Lord's presence would no longer protect the people. Without fidelity, the city of Jerusalem could not provide the kind of protection that the people needed. However, the time would come whenever a new Daughter Zion would fulfill that purpose.

This new Daughter Zion would rely on the Lord alone. Rather than consorting with other nations, the new Daughter Zion would be dedicated to the Lord alone, a Virgin Daughter Zion. The Virgin Mary fulfilled the role of Virgin Daughter Zion because she is a source of strength for all who call upon her. Whereas the city of Jerusalem was destroyed more than once by invading armies, the Virgin Mary was never conquered by the evil one; she never gave into temptation. She was never corrupted or conquered.

The Lord is the source of strength against spiritual enemies. The Virgin Mary can give no strength of her own to anyone. But just as the Lord's strength and providential care was extended to the city of Jerusalem, such that those who sought refuge in the city could find the Lord's protection there, so those who look to the Virgin Mary will find the Lord's protection in her. The prophet Jeremiah had the court official Ebed-melech to help him find his way out of the mud in the cistern. We have the Virgin Mary to help us rise above whatever problems we have. We look to her for protection, because through her, the Lord will cover us with His strength.

Whenever we look at our lives, perhaps we see that we need some protection against the anxieties that life brings. There are so many things that bring us stress, so many things that drain our energy. We can get sick of things quickly or even slowly. What is it that drains our strength or our energy? What can make us feel lost or afraid? Maybe there are times whenever we feel like we just need something more, some kind of help.

Maybe there are times whenever we feel like we are sinking in mud. We might feel trapped in some way. Maybe we feel like we cannot get out of a sinful situation. Others pull us into impure conversations or gossip, for example. Maybe we just have a sense of mediocrity, some kind of situation that does not look like it will get better. We want to find a new joy, or something that will help us rise above the status quo.

As we approach the altar, we can find strength in the Virgin Mary, that friend who can pull us out of the mud. She fulfilled the prophecies and the role of Virgin Daughter Zion, and we can find the Lord's strength if we call upon her. The second reading mentions the cloud of witnesses that help us to persevere in the faith. There are so many who want to help us, who want to advocate for us to get out of the mud, so to speak, in our lives. The saints wish to help us, if we call upon them. We have a spiritual family here and with Catholics throughout the world. With the Virgin Mary and all the saints to help us, we can find the Lord's strength to persevere, and the Lord will pull us out of the mud.