

We heard a very personal witness from the prophet Jeremiah in the first reading. You can almost picture him in a state of anguish as he speaks to God. To recognise the depth of what he is saying, we need to recall that God had called Jeremiah to be a prophet and to speak out during a difficult time for the people. There was internal division among the people and threats from outside forces. Jeremiah had become a laughingstock and the butt of everyone's jokes. In today's terms, we could say that he was being bullied. He wants to escape from it. He begins to think that the best way to escape will be to walk away from the mission that God had given him, and to give up being a prophet. It seems he is ready to do this.

But he realises that it is not as simple as he thinks. Somehow or other, God has a pull on him. It is as though he can't run away from God. I think it is important to recognise what is going on here. It is not that God has him chained up and won't let him go free. In fact, it is just the opposite; he can't let go of God. The language we heard in the first reading was powerful. "O God, you have seduced me", he says. He goes on, "you have overpowered me". And then he says, "there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart". All of this language is not the language of being held prisoner by God. Rather, it is the language of being enchanted by God. It is the language of attraction and of attachment. Despite all of the burdens and mockery, Jeremiah still desires to be attached to God.

I think this tells us something profound about being a disciple of God. It reminds me of something Pope Benedict wrote in his first encyclical letter. He said that being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea. If that is all it was, then the Christian life would have a shallow foundation and could easily be undermined by new ideas or difficult ethical choices. That was what Jeremiah was facing as he experienced pressure from all sides to act differently. Pope Benedict went on to describe being a Christian as the result of the encounter with an event or a person. As we heard in the reading, what kept Jeremiah on course was the attraction of God. His heart was burning, and nothing was going to destroy his relationship with God. Pope Benedict continued his reflection by saying that this encounter with a person, gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. This is bigger than an ethical choice or a good idea. It is about a whole new way of looking at life. And for Jeremiah this was attractive, even when people were bullying him.

We see this same dynamic being worked out in the Gospel. At first, we can think poorly of Peter when he rejects Jesus' declaration about the fate he will soon encounter that will end in his death. I think Peter reacts so strongly because he in fact is enchanted by Jesus. He doesn't want to see Jesus persecuted and put to death. But Jesus' response to Peter indicates that Peter's encounter with Jesus is now ready to go to a deeper level. That deeper level will be worked out in the encounter with the risen Jesus and the new horizon on life that comes with the resurrection.

I think Jesus is warning Peter that you can't manipulate the encounter with Jesus. You can't make him look the way you want him to look. You can't merely half listen to what he says or choose some parts of his life and message and leave the rest aside. As we know, Peter will have his own moment when he is tested as Jeremiah was. This will come at the very time Jesus spoke about – when the elders and chief priests will arrest him. At that time, Peter will be asked if he knows Jesus and he will deny him three times. It will take a little longer before we see Peter's attachment to Jesus mature. Then the new life that Jesus brings will truly open up a new horizon and a decisive direction in his life.

Jesus' message to Peter, and the disciples – and his message to us – that we should take up our cross and follow him, has always been a difficult message to hear. The only way it makes sense is if it is heard in the context of an encounter with Jesus that is more than simply an ethical choice or a big idea. It makes sense if we hear it with the words and experience of Jeremiah, who said, "there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart". When there is a fire burning in your heart you will probably do almost anything for the other person, or you will accept things for the sake of your relationship with the other, that would normally spark fear or anxiety.

In the end, I think that Jesus' words to us are not about looking for a cross to carry, but of being so deeply attached to Jesus that whatever the difficulties or challenges we face because of him – and these are the crosses – we value our encounter with him. In this way, that encounter will keep giving direction to our life and opening up for us a new horizon that helps us make sense of whatever we face.