

Pent-up power (Jeremiah 33:14-16)

November 15, 2003

Born in the vast mountain ranges of British Columbia, the Fraser River floods southward to its rendezvous with the Pacific. At one stage of that long journey the mountains gather themselves to form a deep narrow canyon through which the Fraser must pass. It does so in a thunderous flood, gouging an almost 200-foot deep bed before spilling into the wide valley that takes it westward to the ocean.

The river is a word of nature uttering a spiritual truth: Confinement can empower. Confinement can bring into being a bursting-out into wide expanses. John Bunyan in his cell in Bedford, Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his cell at Tegel—they and countless others witness to this truth.

Jeremiah speaks from confinement. The psalmist feels confined by the presence of enemies. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, is smarting from recent confinements on his ministry. Jesus speaks to those around him with a sense of his impending confinement. All are moved to deep spiritual insights.

To be a contemporary man or woman is to feel the confinement of this time in history. No society, whatever its resources, can achieve all it wishes. Today, to be American is to feel confined by a new kind of fear, no less strong because it exists behind a shield of unprecedented military power. To be Islamic is for many to feel resentment—even rage—against a West that sets boundaries to what one considers to be a moral vision for all societies. To be Chinese is to sense the confinement of a huge society not yet empowered to claim what it considers its place in the world. To be European is to feel the confinement of the differences of language, culture and histories, all offering rich treasures yet also making unity difficult to achieve.

Empires, nations, cities, congregations, individual lives, all face the limitations that can defeat dreams but can also—and this is the truth in these scriptures—make possible much achievement. Confinement can send the mind and the heart on journeys toward the most distant horizons.

Jeremiah lives in a society that responds to his efforts with ingratitude and rejection. Yet even as he paces the courtyard in which he is confined, he envisages his society

transformed, recapturing its original morning time. He speaks of the return of a joy in nationhood, a thriving economy and, undergirding all, a deep commitment to doing justice and being right with God. Far from crushing his spirit, confinement enlarges his vision of the essentially merciful and generous nature of God.

The realization that one has enemies, personal or professional, can make one adopt a guarded and self-limiting stance toward life. Yet in Psalm 25, where someone is wrestling with this kind of situation, we see the psalmist reaching out to the one he can trust as *not* treacherous, to whom he can relate, secure in the knowledge that in God he has a source of steadfast love.

There must have been times when Paul wondered if it was all worth it. Unpleasant receptions often culminated in rejection, with communities at each other's throats about this or that issue. Paul faced it all. Yet the knowledge that there were great people to rejoice in, a community where there was at least the promise of good things to come, makes all the difference at this juncture. Such knowledge—that there is within reach even a small circle of those who respond and care, who show enthusiasm and purpose—makes all the difference when otherwise disappointment and a sense of defeat could make us their prisoner.

For Jesus there is a sense of time shortening, as the days themselves do at this time of year. There have been recent moments of vicious and aggressive questioning, contemptuous dismissals of the authority he seems to assume. Being human, Jesus finds his thoughts and feelings clouded. Images of threat and fear and confusion come into his mind, images speaking to him of the troubling world around him but also of his inner turmoil. As we walk with him, these images expand, becoming thoughts of cosmic threat—sun, moon, stars, ocean, the earth itself, all heaving in turmoil. His own sense of fear and foreboding becomes a universal fearfulness and foreboding. He feels that confrontation is near.

Jesus' inner wrestling can be seen as a pattern of our own. Personal fears can become cosmic dread. We see a tower fall and the tower becomes more than a tower. We dread the falling of a world both familiar and dear. Our deepest psyche is shaken, and so the world itself seems to be shaken.

And yet what do we hear from this companion we walk with, this companion who has been speaking of dark and terrifying things? As we look at him we see his pace quicken. His voice changes. To our astonishment he is giving us a litany of confidence and hope. For every image of terror and threat, there is now one of hope.

For everything that would limit and confine, there is outreach and expansiveness. We see a raising of his head in expectation, his hand pointing to the leaves bursting from a nearby fig tree. We hear from him a mention of summertime, a pointing to nothing less than a kingdom, a plea for alertness, a determination to stand firm. We are astonished at the transformation, and in the same moment we realize that he is demanding nothing less of us, and that he is demanding this for the world of our time.