

John Farnan told me when he was a kid in school, one day, when the teacher wasn't looking, some kid threw a spitball and hit him in the face. John picked it up and threw it back, just as the teacher looked up. She started blaming John until he piped up with this explanation: "He threw it at me first and hit me in the cheek. I was giving it back so he could throw it again while I turn the other cheek." The teacher thought that was pretty clever, but John still got punished.

No matter how old we are, we don't always get along with everybody. Kids in the classroom should be friends. Teachers should inspire good conduct. Coworkers should get along. Bosses should give vision. Brothers and sisters should love one another. It doesn't always work out that way. Sometimes your most intimate friend turns against you.

Jeremiah the prophet had a terrible time with people who should have been his friends. He obediently delivered the speeches God asked of him, but these were unpopular. In one section of his book, Jeremiah steps back from his prophecies and laments what is happening to him personally. Today's first reading comes from that section. People who used to be his friends are on the watch for him to make any misstep. He overhears them whispering to one another, "Let's denounce this guy who says there is terror on every side. He'll be trapped and we can take our vengeance on him." Jeremiah hears his own friends plotting against him because he spoke up and said what God wanted him to say.

He goes to his last refuge: he prays to God. He concludes that God tests the just and probes mind and heart. Jeremiah could easily have thought his sufferings proved that God abandons the just, but he says God tests the just. God stays with them to see how strong they are. God probes mind and heart, Jeremiah says. God plays with your brain. God examines your doubt, to test the strength of your faith. In this prayer, Jeremiah attempts to see through God and read God's mind about these ex-friends all around him. In the end he believes God is good, and the bad things happening to him were God's way of finding out how strong Jeremiah was in the face of adversity.

Jeremiah passes the test. He says this prayer in complete confidence: "The Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble; they will not triumph."

As human beings we are brothers and sisters to everyone in the world. It is not easy to turn the other cheek. It is painful to discover that some people want us out of the way, silenced, weakened or dead. It is frightening to discover we sometimes want the same things for the difficult people we know. In Jeremiah's view, the strife among humans is not a sign of the absence of God, but of the presence of God sorting out who has

faith, who has inner strength, and who rescues the poor from the power of the wicked. What has God learned by testing you?