

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scripture Readings

First Reading: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

In those days, the princes said to the king: "Jeremiah ought to be put to death; he is demoralizing the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such things to them; he is not interested in the welfare of our people, but in their ruin." King Zedekiah answered: "He is in your power"; for the king could do nothing with them. And so they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Prince Malchiah, which was in the quarters of the guard, letting him down with ropes. There was no water in the cistern, only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud. Ebed-melech, a court official, went there from the palace and said to him: "My Lord king, these men have been at fault in all they have done to the prophet Jeremiah, casting him into the cistern. He will die of famine on the spot, for there is no more food in the city." Then the king ordered Ebed-melech the Cushite to take three men along with him, and draw the prophet Jeremiah out of the cistern before he should die.

Second Reading: Hebrews 12:1-4

Brothers and sisters: Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God. Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

Gospel: Luke 12:49-53

Jesus said to his disciples: "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

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Psalm 40

Lord, come to my aid!

I have waited, waited for the Lord, and he stooped toward me.

The Lord heard my cry. He drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp; he set my feet upon a crag; he made firm my steps.

And he put a new song into my mouth, a hymn to our God. Many shall look on in awe and trust in the Lord.

Though I am afflicted and poor, yet the Lord thinks of me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, hold not back!

Lord, come to my aid!

O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever. Amen.

Focus of This Week's Readings

The Lord came to the aid of Jeremiah whose preaching brought upon him rejection and ill treatment. For those who take the gospel seriously, misunderstanding and division must likewise be expected. Like Christ, we must never grow despondent or abandon the struggle to proclaim and live the truth.

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What Does It All Mean?

First Reading: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

History remembers Jeremiah as the most important figure in the events that gave shape and identity to the people known as the Jews. Son of a priestly family, he was called as a boy to speak for God. During his lifetime, King Josiah ruled Judah, and while the king was rebuilding the temple, the ancient book of the law was found. Josiah instituted many religious and ethical reforms, principally by evicting the cults and temples of various gods from Jerusalem and by dedicating the city to the mysterious, unrepresentable God of the exodus. Jeremiah appears to have played a major role in these reforms. His prophecies reflect his conviction that God's people are entrusted with a special mission to teach the other nations God's ways of righteousness and justice. The prophet outlived the great king, however, Josiah's successors made one disastrous political move after another, despite Jeremiah's eloquent and insightful warnings. As a result, Jeremiah also outlived the kingdom that had been his home. He died in Egypt, having been smuggled out of Jerusalem as Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian hordes were sacking the city and taking its inhabitants into captivity. The book that bears Jeremiah's name reveals a powerful ethical sensibility rooted in the one God, as well as brilliant, if futile, analyses of Judah's political situation. This text shows Jerusalem rattling under the siege of the Chaldeans (Babylonians). Surveying the situation, Jeremiah has heard from God that the Egyptians will not help. The Chaldeans will capture the city and destroy it. For announcing this message, Jeremiah is pronounced a traitor. The king permits the accusers to throw Jeremiah into a cistern, where he sinks in the mud. Later the king relents, ordering one Ebed-melech to pull the prophet from the pit. Jeremiah is a disturbing figure. Here the king responds to him in two conflicting ways, first permitting his condemnation and then allowing his rescue. Perhaps this is a common response to God's work. We are never quite sure how to respond to the one who carries it, because often we do not want to hear what is said to us.

Second Reading: Hebrews 12:1-4

Having reinterpreted the history of the Jewish people in the preceding chapter, the author of Hebrews reaches the epistle's main point: Let us put aside all sin, let us keep running the race, let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. The imagery suggests that all the heroic figures of the past have made it possible for us to run a race in which Jesus calls us from beyond the finish line. Now they sit in the stadium cheering, and it is out run to run. The race is difficult, but we must continue until we reach our goal.

Gospel: Luke 12:49-53

Jesus delivers hard and bewildering words to his followers and to us: "My purpose is to light a fire on the earth, and I wish it were already lit! I must receive a baptism, and I am in agony until it is over!" He insists that no matter what we might have thought, he has not come to establish peace, but division. A household will be divided, father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. This difficult passage seems to contradict many other portions of the gospel. It seems not to fit into our notions of the prince of peace. But Christians ought never to expect that discipleship makes life easy. To follow Jesus into his baptism is to participate with him in his passion and resurrection. It is to carry significant responsibilities, and sometimes to be misunderstood and even punished for meeting our responsibilities. It is to be thrown into the mud at the bottom of the pit, where we can commiserate with Jeremiah. To follow Jesus is to speak God's word, in what we say and in our actions.

Playing With Fire

Jesus likes to play with fire. In fact, he wants to set the world on fire. He wishes it was already on fire! The Bible is a book of divine fire; the Gospel, the Word of God, lights the world up. This is the kind of fire Jesus wants to start. But it is dangerous-when you start fires, you will be opposed. Jeremiah's loyalty to God's Word get him thrown into a well filled with mud. Can you imagine being shoved into a deep hole only to sink deeper into gunk? The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus faced opposition and persecution, and if we speak in his name, we will face much of the same. Then there is Jesus, letting us know that our message may turn people-even family-against us.

Is it worth it? Absolutely. Fire changes things: when fire touches something, it chemically changes or can be molded. The Gospel changes people; when we spread this fire, our world changes for the better-even if there is opposition. So, go ahead, pick that Bible up and go start a fire. You have our permission.

Lord, thank you for sustaining me through the many trials I have faced in this life—the ones I am currently facing , as well as the ones to come. You teach me that I find power in keeping my eyes fixed on you—my leader and perfecter of faith. May I never avert my gaze from you until I see you face to face in heaven. Amen.