

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

For nearly three-fourths of a century after the death of Isaiah no great prophet arose in Judah. It seemed as though the work of the religious leaders in the 8th century B.C. had been in vain. During the long and wicked reign of Manasseh (693-639 B.C.) idolatrous worship was established more firmly than ever, and the morals of the people sank to the lowest ebb. The prophets of Yahweh who dared to raise their voices in protest and warning were either silenced or brutally murdered. It was only after a change for the better had been inaugurated under the successors of Manasseh, that “men of God” again came to the forefront, and a second golden age of Hebrew prophecy began. It is the age of Jeremiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The greatest of these, and at the same time the most Christlike of all the prophets, was Jeremiah.

As we join our first reading today it is 588 B.C., the armies of Nebuchadnezzar have laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah has counseled surrender, but at the instigation of the princes was thrown into prison. Set free, he attempted to retire to his native Anathoth (a Levitical town of Benjamin north of Jerusalem) only to be apprehended as a “deserter.”

⁴ "This man ought to be put to death," the princes said to the king; "he demoralizes the soldiers who are left in this city,

The full expression is “he weakens the hands of the soldiers.”

and all the people, by speaking such things to them; he is not interested in the welfare of our people, but in their ruin.” ⁵ King Zedekiah answered:

After hearing the complaint of the princes, the king states his own criticism: The true power is not in his hands but those of the princes.

"He is in your power"; for the king could do nothing with them. ⁶ 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.

Their final intention was to bring about Jeremiah’s death without bloodshed [sort of like when Joseph was put into the cistern (Genesis 37:17-22)].

⁸ [] Ebed-melech

A Cushite (Ethiopian) eunuch in the court of Zedekiah. The Greek *aithiopia* (burnt face-dom) is derived from the same Egyptian phrase from which *aigyptos* (Egypt) is derived. The ancient

Ethiopia was not the same region as the modern kingdom of Ethiopia; the name designated the ancient Nubia, the modern Sudan: the valley of the Nile from the 2nd cataract to the 6th cataract.

went there from the palace and said to him,⁹ "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."¹⁰ 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.

2nd Reading - Hebrews 12:1-4

Last week we began our study of the book of Hebrews from where we had left off in Cycle B. Last week we heard of the faith of Abraham as an example of the theological faith that we all should possess – a faith of hope and trust. We now hear how we are to live out our faith.

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,

Like the glory cloud of God's presence.

let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us² while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader

The context is the running of a race in which those who run must free themselves from anything which would impede their progress and keep their eyes on the final destination, Jesus.

and perfecter of faith.

The one who consecrates us.

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.

Jesus is the model for endurance and hardship.

³ Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

It is difficult to know the nature of the hardships and the persecution the addressees suffered after being baptized and becoming Christians, but it appears that none of the community has undergone martyrdom. We are called to be like Christ and He did this.

“Christ bore our corruption only in His flesh, in which truly He bore also our death. In His soul, however, He preserved a perfect incorruptibility, as He had no sin by inheritance nor did He contract any through contagion. Whence also Christ bore without any corruption the weaknesses of our souls, which He bore in His rational soul. For no deficiency of power could be present where the perfection of love held strong in the unflinching acceptance of weakness, a perfection of love which

brought the Only-begotten God to march straight to death for us, and, despising shame, to bear the disgrace of the cross. On that account did Christ have the sorrow and grief of our souls; and if He had the weaknesses of our souls, He had them truly, but voluntarily. Truly, of course, so that He might manifestly display in Himself the feeling of a rational soul; and voluntarily, so that He could demonstrate that the assistance of His strength was ready to help our weaknesses.” [Saint Fulgence of Ruspe (A.D. 512-527), *Letter to Count Reginus* 18,9]

⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

Gospel - Luke 12:49-53

Continuing our discussion of last week where Jesus told the disciples of internal problems caused by selfish Church officials, Jesus now goes on to tell them that He has not come to give peace, but discord.

[Jesus said to His disciples:] ⁴⁹ "I have come to set the earth on fire,

Fire is usually a figure of judgement (see [Luke 3:16-17](#)); here it seems to be the fire that will separate and purify those who are meant for the kingdom (purgatorial fire?). It will work through Jesus' word and His Spirit. *The Gospel of Thomas* (an apocryphal Gnostic gospel) , saying 10: “Jesus said, ‘I have thrown fire on the world and, behold, I am guarding it until it is ablaze’.”

and how I wish it were already blazing! ⁵⁰ There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!

Jesus refers to His coming passion, into which He will be “plunged.” The image is derived from [Psalm 124:4-5](#) and indicates the depths of sorrow and suffering that await Him in His human condition. In the case of infants or adults, martyrdom can take the place of actual baptism in water.

“We have, indeed, a second font, one with the former: namely, that of blood, of which the Lord says: “There is a baptism with which I must be baptized,” when He had already been baptized. For he had come through water and blood (1 John 5:6), as John wrote, so that He might be baptized with water and glorified with blood. He sent out these two baptisms from the wound in His pierced side, that we might in like manner be called by water and chosen by blood, and so that they who believed in His blood might be washed in the water. If they might be washed in water, they must necessarily be so by blood (see Matthew 22:14). This is the baptism which replaces that of the fountain, when it has not been received, and restores it when it has been lost.” [Tertullian (A.D. 200-206), *Baptism* 16,1]

⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.

This doesn't contradict Luke 1:79 or 7:50. Jesus will not tolerate peace at any cost. He will not bring the sobriety of the status quo, but the sword that will divide the eager from the contented. By resisting, through sin, the redeeming work of Christ, we become His opponents.

⁵² From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three;
⁵³ 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.”