

August 18th, 2019, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 38: 4-6, 8-10

The prophet Jeremiah was an outspoken and relentless defender of God's truth and justice. He often found himself in trouble with the authorities, both secular and religious. In today's reading he is the ultimate "prophet of doom," for he has been warning the people that their continued infidelity to their covenant with God will result in the destruction of Jerusalem. Such news is never welcome, but it is especially alarming to those who know that the charge of infidelity is true! Their response is to try to keep their maneuverings secret and ignore the long-term consequences.¹

In those days, the princes said to the king: The princes who claim to be defending the peace of the people are in reality, protecting their own interests. Jeremiah's views are right and he speaks in virtue of his function as a Prophet so he is looked upon as a dangerous man. The princes are unable to bear a contradiction that condemns them.⁵

⁴"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." Jeremiah prophesied to the people of Judah, particularly its wealthy and ruling elite, that its corruption, injustice to the poor, and myriad other sins were unacceptable to God and carried serious consequences, notably, the kingdom's subjugation to Babylon. For this he was accused of treason.²

⁵King Zedekiah answered: "He is in your power"; for the king could do nothing with them. King Zedekiah was a leader who was incapable of making firm decisions. He agreed with everybody, which resulted in his nation's being in turmoil. He was told by Jeremiah that if he accepted Egypt's help and stayed in Jerusalem, he would be destroyed by the Babylonian army. He asked Jeremiah to come secretly to the palace, hoping for some better news from God. The king was in a panic, he wanted to hear God's word but he had no desire to enter into a political conflict with some of his public officials.³ These verses show how very different in attitude Zedekiah and Jeremiah were. Zedekiah used all his ingenuity and political skill to save himself and Judah from their enemies: but he lost both life and land. Jeremiah, however, preached the word of God without diluting it in any way—even though people clamored for his death and when the Babylonians won the day, he was released from prison and survived (v. 28). It is very much what Jesus taught: "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 16:25).⁶

⁶And 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. One ecclesiastical writer, Olympiodorus, interpreted Jeremiah's imprisonment as a prefigurement of Jesus' passion and death. Commenting on this verse, he said: "The prophet becomes a figure of the mystery of Christ, who was handed over by Pilate to the Jews, descended into hell, and was raised from the dead. Jeremiah climbs out of the cistern he was cast into; Scripture often refers to hell as a cistern."⁶

The missing verse tells us that Ebed-melech goes to see the king who is at the gate of Benjamin where legal matters were handled. This public official stood alone in his protest of the murder plot and injustice being done to Jeremiah. This action could have cost him his life, but God spared him when Jerusalem fell (39:16-18).³

⁸Ebed-melech, a court official, 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."

¹⁰Then 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. **Jeremiah's own people are the ones who try to shut him up and it is a Cushite, a foreigner, who rescues him.**¹ This servant of the king was an Ethiopian eunuch in the court of Zedekiah.⁴

Hebrews 12:1-4

Brothers and sisters:

¹Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, This refers to all those who have gone before us and have run the race successfully. They strengthen us simply by showing that the race can be won!¹ According to the Catechism, these are the ones who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those whom the Church recognizes as saints. They contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth. When they entered into the joy of their Master, they were "put in charge of many things." Their intercession is their most exalted service to God's plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world.⁷ (CCC 2683) This "cloud of witnesses" refers to the multitude of holy people in the course of the history of Israel who stayed faithful to God. They are a cloud, a huge number filling the sky. The image of the cloud suggests that these witnesses are high up, near the sun, a sign of their spiritual stature.⁸ **let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us** Some burdens are particularly troublesome to get rid of. The "sin which clings to us" involves more effort than simply laying something aside, because what clings to us is more difficult to remove. Nevertheless, we must take extra pains to rid ourselves of it, lest it slow us down.¹ The verb used to describe this sin indicates it is something which surrounds one on all sides and can easily get a foothold and is persistent.

According to St. Thomas, "We may have here an allusion to occasions of sin, to the fact that sin is present all around us, that is, in the world, in the flesh, in our neighbor and in the devil." Anything that does not lead to God is a hindrance. Root it out and throw it far from you!⁸ **and persevere in running the race that lies before us**

²while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, Living a Catholic Christian Life means not only talking the talk but also walking the walk and it involves hard work! We are called to let go of anything or anyone who endangers our personal relationship with the Lord. We are to run patiently and to struggle against sin in our lives with the power of the Holy Spirit. To live this type of life, we must constantly keep our vision on the Lord Jesus Christ. We stumble and eventually fall when we take our eyes off Jesus Christ and look at ourselves or the circumstances surrounding us. We need to remember that we are running Christ's race and we must always keep him in sight. When hardship and discouragement come, it is easy to lose sight of the big picture.³ **the leader and perfecter of faith.** Jesus is the one who will lead us to perfection in faith and will transform it into the perfection of glory for if we believe, it is because he has moved us to faith, and if we are glorified, it will be because he has helped us to stay true to the end.⁸ **For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross,** In the passion of Christ there are three things to consider: in the first place what he gave up, then what he suffered, and thirdly what he merited.⁸ **despising its shame,** The earliest known artistic depiction of Jesus' Crucifixion dates from the middle of the fifth century. Part of the reason for this near total absence of the Crucifixion from the art of the ancient Church is explained by this verse: the "shame" of the cross was like few other kinds of public humiliation in antiquity. Crucifixion was intended to shame the victim and the victim's family, and to terrorize others contemplating actions similar to those for which the victim had been condemned. It was the punishment of common criminals, slaves, and people judged guilty of sedition against Rome.² **and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God.** According to St. Thomas, the exaltation of Christ's human nature was the reward for his passion.⁸

3Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, The difficulties Jesus had to contend with were quite exceptional: Jews and Gentiles opposed him; he suffered every kind of humiliation, to the extreme of his passion and death; but what pained him most was the hardheartedness, spiritual blindness and impenitence of those whom he had come to save.⁸ **in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart.** The author is writing to encourage his readers to persevere in their faith. In this reading he offers Jesus as an example for them to imitate. Surely they can finish the race they have begun since they have suffered so much less than Jesus. Unlike Jesus, they have not shed their blood.²

4In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. Following Christ's example, Christians should struggle to avoid sin; they should put up with tribulation and persecution because if such adversity arises it means that the Lord permits it for our good.⁸

Luke 12:49-53

Jesus said to his disciples:

49“I have come to set the earth on fire, Fire symbolizes the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit's actions. The prayer of the prophet Elijah, who “arose like fire” and whose “word burned like a torch,” brought down fire from heaven on the sacrifice on Mount Carmel. This event was a figure of the fire of the Holy Spirit, who transforms what he touches. John the Baptist, who goes “before (the Lord) in the spirit and power of Elijah,” proclaims Christ as the one who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” In the form of tongues “as of fire,” the Holy Spirit rests on the disciples on the morning of Pentecost and fills them with himself. The spiritual tradition has retained this symbolism of fire as one of the most expressive images of the Holy Spirit's actions. “Do not quench the Spirit.”⁷ (CCC 696) Fire, in the Bible, symbolizes the sovereign power of God, His purifying activity, and His formidable presence. When our Lord speaks about the fire He is bringing upon earth, He is thinking principally of His mission among men. He brings a new presence of the Almighty. The ancient author, Origen, puts on Christ's lips the words: “he who is near Me is near the fire.” In all the languages of the world, love has always chosen the symbol of fire to reveal its nature. With much greater reason can the infinitely intense Love of God liken itself to an ardent fire! Christ is the revelation of this fire. It is impossible to come close to Him without being interiorly penetrated by the light and the heat of this furnace.⁵ Fire is also an instrument of judgment.¹¹ **and how I wish it were already blazing!**

50There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished! “Baptism” as it is used here comes from the Greek word which means an immersion, or plunging, into water. Jesus speaks of being immersed in his passion and death.⁹ This baptism is a reference to his passion and death and he wishes that it were already accomplished. But the baptism (the death and resurrection) is precisely what ushers in the fire (the Holy Spirit) — no wonder the anguish is profound! Our own lives parallel that of Jesus in that Baptism is the first of the sacraments, the one that initiates us into the kingdom and enables us to receive the fire of the Holy Spirit.¹

51Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. There is an apparent contradiction here with the infancy account's promise that Jesus would bring peace (1:79; 2:14, 29). The answer is that those who accept the prophet have this peace but they are then separated from those who reject the prophet's message.¹¹

52From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; Over and over again a man had to decide whether he loved his kith and kin or Christ better. The essence of Christianity is that loyalty to Christ has to take precedence over the dearest loyalties of this earth. A man must be prepared to count all things but loss for the excellence of Jesus Christ.¹²

53a 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.” Our Lord is forewarning his disciples about the contention and division which will accompany the spread of the Gospel.¹⁰

Some of the information for this commentary was taken from: (1) “Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers: 1995” by Aelred Rosser, (2) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2007” by James L. Weaver, (3) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998” by Lawrence E. Mick, (4) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (5) “Saint Joseph Commentary On The Sunday Readings” by Achille Degeest, O.F.M., (6) “The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets,” (7) “Catechism Of The Catholic Church,” (8) “The Navarre Bible: Hebrews,” (9) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998” by Lawrence E. Mick, (10) “The Navarre Bible: St Luke,” (11) “The Gospel of Luke” by Luke Timothy Johnson, and (12) “The Gospel Of Luke” by William Barclay.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.