

“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.” Words from our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the letter to the Hebrews – sisters and brothers, may the Lord give to you his peace and his joy.

Our readings today challenge our usual ways of thinking, for they do not present the Christian lifestyle as full of a sweet peace nor is our way of life an easy observance of the commandment of love. Rather, they speak to the intensity that marks the climate proper to an authentic Christianity. This should make us stop and think: What are our readings tell us? What is happening here? What can they add to our understanding?

In our first reading, the nation of Israel is in full blown crisis mode as they are about to be conquered by the Babylonians after years of fighting and continuously yielding up influence. All the while, the prophet Jeremiah has been going about lamenting how the nation of Israel has ultimately gone astray by abandoning God and God’s ways and so preached repentance. As a result of speaking such difficult truth to power, political power plays are made against Jeremiah and he is thrown in a cistern and is left to die. The civil unrest in the Kingdom of Israel is tangible and the great tensions are unleashed upon people of good will. How very much like our own times, when we feel the unrest in our country over many issues, while the good truths of religion are continuously disregarded, such as the presence of Christ in the sacraments, Jesus’ teachings, and our work of service to humanity, to name a few - each important aspects of our identity and all swept aside and forgotten by more and more Americans amid the heavy scrutiny of immoral men. It is not easy today to be prophetic, let alone be a person of faith.

This is reinforced furthermore, by the picture Jesus paints of himself in this gospel. This passage is troubling if we think of Jesus only under the image of a gentle Messiah who comes in peace and yet, here Jesus insists that his coming can also be comparable to a dramatic prophetic visitation that will set the world on fire. As such, his coming will force the issue of adjusting our priorities based primarily upon faithfulness to God and his Kingdom. It is not that Jesus is eager for these disturbing events and resulting divisions to unfold; rather, he himself burns with such zeal for the accomplishment of his mission for the conversion of souls to God, which in calling for radical change, will inevitably include such consequences. Some years ago, Karl Rahner prophesied that the Christian of the future will either be a spiritual mystic or will not exist at all. We too must be baptized, be immersed deeply in that zeal, be set on fire for the Lord or risk joining all those who have drifted away from their faith altogether.

The Christian journey of faith is long and arduous, and we will need help along our way. Sometimes, this help comes from the most unlikely of places. We heard today how Jeremiah's life was saved through the intercession of Ebed-melech, who was actually the foreign ambassador to Israel of all people, and was appalled by the rampant injustice he found within Israelite society. And just as we may come to realize that those closest to us are unfortunately not supportive of our goals and our values, so we can also discover others who belong to the family of Christ, brothers and sisters of the Lord who truly appreciate the stands we take and the directions we set for ourselves. The author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. These are the saints living and deceased who make this journey alongside us. We can think of the many heroes and saintly figures who have personally impacted our own lives by the sacrifices they have made and the great care that they exhibit towards us. I can name them for myself: grandpa, my parents, Mr. Morcelle, Ron Adamczak, Ms. Kor, Fr. Jim Walter, Fr. Walt Szczesny, Fr. Bryan, Christina Egleston, and many others besides. Studies show that those who have five or more people who come into their lives to help them grow in discipleship will successfully integrate and authentically practice their faith going forward. I hope you can name your own heroes of faith who are the "saints next door" as Pope Francis calls them. Additionally, we have the many patronal saints who champion certain causes, and we can pray to them for their assistance. St. Anthony helps us find lost things. St. Peregrine stands for those battling cancer. St. Francis is concerned for animals and our pets. St. Jude is there to help those in hopeless situations. St. Catherine of Siena is the patron of nurses. There are thousands of saints who are praying for us. And every time we gather for the Eucharist, they are here present too all around us for our encouragement. Just as parents cheer on their kids their sports games and performances and just as the Buffalo Bills tout having a 12<sup>th</sup> man on the team when they play in front of their fans at New Era Field, the communion of saints is our own Catholic version of people cheering us on and tangibly supporting us in our journey through life. Most importantly, the real support and assistance we receive is from Jesus himself who came to set our hearts and the world on fire. He himself struggled through this life and rose from it victorious. He is our leader and the perfecter of faith. Having gone before us, he is our hope, that we may not grow weary or lose heart while likewise running towards our goal. The French Priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin famously declared: Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire. May we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as our forerunner and goal, so that together with him and all those who joined to the Body of Christ, we may harness the energy of love and set the world afire.

# Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 120

## Reading 1

Jer 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.

## Responsorial Psalm

Ps 40:2, 3, 4, 18

R. (14b) **Lord, come to my aid!**

I have waited, waited for the LORD,

and he stooped toward me.

**R. Lord, come to my aid!**

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.

**R. Lord, come to my aid!**

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.

**R. Lord, come to my aid!**

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!

**R. Lord, come to my aid!**

## Reading 2

Heb 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.

**Alleluia**

Jn 10:27

**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**

My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord;

I know them, and they follow me.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

## Gospel

Lk 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."