

20TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

By Al Mansfield

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

Psalm 40

Hebrews 12:1-4

Luke 12:49-53

SUFFERING, STRUGGLE, DIVISION

In school I once had a demanding teacher whose favorite expression was, “Life is tough!” Those of us in his class would readily confirm that, especially when we took his tests! That expression was certainly true for the prophet Jeremiah. And for the Lord Jesus also, as he took on our human condition, including suffering death on a cross! The word of God speaks to us today about dealing with suffering, struggle, and division.

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah prophesied around 587 BC – and suffered for it – in Jerusalem before the Babylonian Captivity. Jeremiah spoke the word of the Lord but that word was not well received by the Jewish leadership at the time. They tried to silence him by throwing him into a muddy cistern and leaving him there to die.

However, Ebed-melech took three other men and pulled Jeremiah out, saving him. The Responsorial, Psalm 40, seems to reflect Jeremiah’s situation: “He drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp.”

HEBREWS

The Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus the “leader and perfecter of our faith.” We are exhorted to keep our eyes on him. Jesus “endured the cross, despising the shame.” We constantly need to be reminded that Jesus had to endure opposition from sinners, so that we don’t get discouraged and give up the struggle. Besides, we have not yet resisted to the shedding of our blood, as Jesus himself did. Nothing we have to face compares with his suffering!

GOSPEL

It’s worth mentioning yet again that if we’re not shocked by some of the sayings in the gospels, we are probably not reading them carefully enough. Today’s gospel is one of those healthy doses of reality. Jesus has a mission before him, “to set the earth on fire.” He is in anguish until this mission is accomplished.

Jesus says that he is a point of division among family members. This calls to mind another saying regarding family: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Jesus has been an occasion of division in families. “He who is not for me is against me” (Matt. 12:30; Luke 11:33).

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

I find it interesting that St. Luke’s gospel seems to emphasize the love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness of Jesus more than the other gospels. At the same time, however, his gospel is also quite radical and minces no words when it comes to exhortations to detachment, renunciation, and total commitment to discipleship, as we hear today. Luke confirms this in the Acts of the Apostles when he writes, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

The Rule of St. Benedict says, “Prefer nothing whatever to Christ.” We could add, along with St. Luke, prefer nothing *and no one* – not even family members – to Christ.