

Weeks 18 and 19, Fr. Joe was on vacation.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time—C Cycle

August 18, 2013

INTRODUCTION (*Jeremiah 38,4-6.8-10; Hebrews 12,1-4; Luke 12,49-53*)

Suffering and turmoil have been part of everyday life in the Middle East for centuries. Our first reading goes back 600 years before Christ when the land we now know as Iraq was known as Babylon. It was during that time that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, was successfully conquering all the nations that surrounded Babylon. The events we will hear in our first reading took place as the Babylonians were attacking Jerusalem. Jeremiah, one of the greatest prophets of all time, kept telling the Jewish leaders as well as anyone who would listen to him that it was useless for them to defend themselves; they should just surrender to the Babylonians or Jerusalem would be destroyed. Such talk was viewed as unpatriotic and Jeremiah was called a traitor. Many of the Jewish leaders decided to kill Jeremiah and they persuaded their king, Zedekiah, to get rid of the prophet. Zedekiah gave permission for Jeremiah to be thrown into a cistern to die. Later, Ebed-Melech, a Cushite (which means an Ethiopian), one of Jeremiah's friends, persuaded the king to change his mind.

HOMILY - Today's readings are not cheerful. First we heard of Jeremiah who was faithful to God in every way and who spoke God's message to God's people. He was rewarded by being thrown down a cistern and left to die. I'm sure some of us feel like Jeremiah at times. By the way, Jeremiah was correct. Because of the resistance of the Jews, the Babylonians completely destroyed Jerusalem and that led to the Babylonian Exile.

In the gospel we hear of Jesus, THE greatest prophet ever. Luke tells us Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem knowing fully well what was ahead for him. Jesus described this in three ways: as a fire he wished to cast upon the earth, as a baptism he was to receive, and that he would be a cause of division. The fire and baptism he spoke of are vague: (1) fire can symbolize judgment, purification or discernment. It also could symbolize the fire of the Holy Spirit that came upon the apostles at Pentecost. What Jesus meant by fire is unclear. (2) Jesus also spoke of a baptism he would undergo. This is a strange symbol for Jesus to use, especially since he had already received the baptism of John the Baptist. The baptism he was to receive might be clearer if we recall that once Jesus referred to his suffering and death as a baptism when he asked James and John, two apostles who wanted the highest places of honor in God's kingdom, "can you drink the cup that I am to drink or be baptized with the baptism that I shall undergo?" If baptism and fire are difficult to understand, we have no difficulty understanding Jesus when he talks about (3) the division that he would create. "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." This word foretold the sufferings and even the martyrdom some of his followers would experience. Here Jesus focused specifically on division within families for family bonds were one of the strongest and most sacred bonds in the society of

Jesus' time. The example of division that Jesus chose illustrates that membership in God's kingdom was even more important than family ties.

Didn't Jesus come to bring peace? Certainly! At his birth the angels sang "glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to people of good will." When Jesus sent his disciples out on mission, they were instructed that when they entered a person's house they were to say: "Peace to this house." At the Last Supper he promised his disciples a "peace which the world cannot give." After his resurrection, his first words to the disciples when he appeared to them were: "Peace be with you." The greatest source of peace in my life is my relationship with God. Peace is more than just the absence of war, it is a figure for the many blessings that he and his ministry would bring to human beings. (*Fitzmyer, Anchor Bible, pg 225*) So when Jesus speaks of division, he is speaking of the ongoing battle between good and evil, between those who believe and follow him and those who reject him. It is Jesus' intention to offer God's forgiveness and love to all who would accept it. Division results from the fact that there will always be those who resist Jesus' offer.

This battle can go on even within our own selves - with part of us wanting to love God and follow his ways and a part of us wanting to go in the opposite direction. The second reading today from Hebrews encourages us to persevere in running the race and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus for he is the true source of a peace that will have no end.

We come here today with our challenges, our worries and struggles, whether within ourselves, or with our relatives or our neighbors, or our politicians or the world at large. Typically, we work to achieve some peace and stability in our lives, but I suppose there will always be challenges. So we come to our Lord for strength and guidance, for his love and for his peace. Amen.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle August 25, 2013

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading today (*Is. 66, 18-21*) comes from the time when the Jews were exiled in Babylon. They had been in exile for about two generations by the time God sent to them the prophet we hear from today. By this time the Jews had given up any hope of returning to the land of Judea and to their beloved city, Jerusalem. The prophet tells God's disheartened people they would once again worship in Jerusalem. The prophet foresees a time when even people from foreign nations would join the Jewish people in worshiping the God of Israel. More startling yet, the prophet sees a time when foreigners would be accepted as priests. This was a radical concept. The Jews thought they had a monopoly on God's love and they thought that Gentiles had very little chance for salvation or for sharing in God's kingdom. This question about salvation comes up in today's gospel: who will be saved and how many. (*Lk 13, 22-30*).

HOMILY: There are two questions that Jesus addresses in today's gospel: who will be saved and how many. Who and how many will share in the bounty of God's kingdom? You will notice, first of all, that Jesus was asked only one question: "Will only a few people be saved?" Jesus was not asked who will be saved because the Jews presumed that Gentiles would be excluded from God's kingdom in the world to come - with the possibility of very few exceptions. So basically, Jesus was really being asked, "will only a few Jews be saved?" Jesus, like Isaiah in the first reading, shocks his listeners by telling them that God's saving love would be made available to all people, all nations. He thus answered a question they hadn't asked him as to who will be saved? As he said toward the end of today's gospel: "many would come from the east and the west, from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God," while many of God's own people, the Israelites, would be left outside. That was something Jesus' hearers didn't expect to hear.

Now with this clarification that the Jews had no monopoly on salvation, let us return to the original question at the beginning of today's gospel: "will only a few people be saved?" You may have noticed it was a question Jesus chose not to answer directly. I had often wondered why he didn't. This is pure speculation, but my thoughts as to why he didn't give a direct answer go something like this: suppose for example Jesus had said most of you will be saved. I suspect those who heard this might become very complacent and start thinking: "well I'm a better person than most people so I surely have it made - I don't have to keep trying so hard!" However, what if Jesus said "not many of you will be saved," there would likely be a reaction like this: why try to be good, it's going to be too hard anyway. Put in any number or any percent you want and it would lead to a variety of unhelpful responses that Jesus didn't want to create. What Jesus did want to stress was the important idea that we all have to work hard to enter into the kingdom. We can't take it for granted. We can't think we are entitled to it, no matter who we are or to what group we belong. In today's gospel he said we must strive to enter through the narrow gate. The Greek word translated here as "strive" is ἁγωνίζομαι (you can hear the word "agony" in this word). It would be better translated "strain every nerve, take pains, exert yourself, to enter..." That's the indirect answer Jesus gave to his questioner "will only a few be saved?" He said: "Work at it." In other words, as he said on other occasions: "Whoever comes to me listens to my words and acts on them." (Lk. 6,47)

I've thought about another image in today's gospel - the "narrow door." Strive to enter through the narrow door (sometimes it is called a gate, but door is the more accurate word). I have not seen this explanation anywhere, but it struck me the door was narrow because it defined definite boundaries, definite limits to our behavior that fit with what God wants of us. Contrast the narrow door with a big, wide open door that might symbolize doing whatever you feel like doing, no matter what it is or who gets hurt. The wide door symbolized making up our own rules. The narrow door symbolizes living by the values God has taught us and has demanded of us (not just suggested to us) such as: don't cheat or steal, don't lie, don't kill, don't envy, don't use sex inappropriately, keep holy the Lord's day, loving our enemies, do not hold grudges, etc. How many will strive to get through the narrow door and will be able to is a mystery, but Jesus did tell

us many will seek to get in and will not be able. I would like to believe, as I'm sure you would too, that everyone is going to go to heaven when they leave this world. That's not what Jesus is telling us.

On vacation I read a couple of the latest books about near death experiences, one called *Heaven is for Real* and the other titled *Proof of Heaven*. They were beautiful books and very inspiring. One can get the impression from some of the accounts of near death experiences that going to heaven is automatic, but I remember years ago reading about near death experiences and some people reported having had experiences that were not good or happy. As I stress that not everyone will be able to pass through the narrow door, I don't want everyone going home depressed, thinking I don't have a chance. Don't forget the book of Revelations gives us a vision of heaven where there was a great multitude that no one could count standing before God's heavenly throne praising him. So even though Jesus said many will be unable to enter, many also will share in God's kingdom - those who chose to make the effort to get through the narrow door.