

Homily for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

August 14, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10 (The princes of Judah seek Jeremiah's death.)

Responsory: Psalm 40 (Lord, come to my aid!)

Second Reading: Hebrews 12:1-4 (Let us persevere in running the race that lies before us.)

Gospel: Luke 12:49-53 (I have come to set the earth on fire!)

Today's readings are not exactly uplifting. In fact, they're quite distressing. The Prophet Jeremiah so angers and demoralizes his people that the princes of Judah seek the King's permission to kill him. If not for the timely intervention of a court official, the Prophet likely would have died in that cistern. The Letter to the Hebrews attempts to encourage Christians to persevere in their struggle against sin, but the reason for hope that the author gives them seems more sobering than comforting. In contrast to Jesus, "you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood." Then, in the Gospel, Jesus, the so-called "Prince of Peace," claims that he has come to sow *division* and "to set the earth on fire." He even intends to turn family members against one another! If you ask me, it's kind of tough to listen to these readings and respond with a heartfelt, "Thanks be to God," or, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." Why are we giving thanks and praise after hearing that?

These readings are a reminder for us that sometimes the "Good News" doesn't feel very good. The Word of God always speaks the *truth*, but that truth is not always pleasant or welcome. That's why it frequently causes division between those who can accept it and those who prefer to close their ears and ignore it. The bitter conflict that Jeremiah stirred up among his people is a fine example. There is no doubt that he was speaking God's truth to his fellow Jews. For years he had prophesied, with greater and greater urgency, that the Lord was not pleased with their callous disregard for the covenant. He kept pleading with them to repent and change their ways before calamity fell upon them. Then, after Jerusalem was captured, thus vindicating all of Jeremiah's earlier warnings, the Word of the Lord came to him again. He told the people that the Lord would liberate them *eventually*, but for now, they should accept the yoke of their oppressors and not try to launch a rebellion, which would only make matters worse. This was another truth that the princes of Judah *did not want to hear*. They preferred the lie, spoken to them by a false prophet, that the Babylonians would just conveniently disappear in a couple of years, and they would be free again. Thus, Jeremiah's prophecy caused great division between those who recognized the voice of God speaking through him and those who just wanted him to shut up and go away. The King was caught in the middle, because he was incapable of discerning truth from falsehood. So, he just threw up his hands and said to first one side and then the other, "Do what you want with Jeremiah."

The Gospel also has a way of dividing people, as Jesus warned. Initially, the divisions were principally between those who believed that Jesus was the Son of God and those who thought he was a blasphemer and/or a lunatic. Unfortunately, the way that Jesus presented himself left no middle ground. Either people believed his remarkable claim about being "one

with the Father,” or they had to condemn him as the worst kind of fraud. But, even within the Christian community today, the great *demands* that the Gospel places upon us can also lead to divisions – between those who fully embrace those demands and all the challenges that they entail, and those who prefer to water down Jesus’ teachings or disregard some of the more difficult ones.

Jesus challenged his followers to put aside old habits and follow the new way that he taught: a way of mercy, self-denial and trust in the Lord. Some Christians consider Jesus to be too radical or too idealistic. His teachings are *hard*, yet he insisted that his disciples must put them into practice. Remember what he said about the disciple who does *not* put his teachings into practice – he’s like the man who built his house on sand. The winds blow, the floodwaters rise, and the house is destroyed, because it has no solid foundation. To build that solid foundation requires more than *belief*; it requires *commitment*. And, unfortunately, sometimes even friends and family members may not understand why we feel compelled to commit ourselves so completely to the way of Christ.

I can testify to that struggle, from my own family experience. By the time I committed to entering the seminary, after doctoral studies, my brother had renounced his faith and proclaimed himself to be an atheist. My mother, a devout Catholic, was depending on me to be the one to produce grandchildren and raise them in the Catholic faith. And, my father, who could barely bring himself to attend Mass at Christmas and Easter, was totally flabbergasted that I would go through all of those years of higher education only to change course completely. None of them could understand why in the world I felt so compelled to abandon a promising career to become a priest and a consecrated religious. To tell you the truth, I had trouble articulating a satisfactory answer, even for myself, until Mom found it for me in a church hymnal on Good Friday. The final verse of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” says, “A love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” Mom pointed to that verse in the hymnal and whispered, “That’s you, isn’t it?”

Those words captured perfectly the sentiment that I had felt, but struggled to express. Yet, they are not meant only for priests and religious. We *all* “survey the wondrous cross” and witness there a love so amazing, so divine, that it demands a total gift of self in return. This is the same image that the Letter to the Hebrews uses to exhort *all Christians* to greater faithfulness and perseverance in our struggle against sin. The author urges us to look upon our crucified Lord, who resisted evil to the point of shedding blood. How much are *we* willing to suffer in order to follow him? That challenge is mixed with *hope*, however, for the author reminds us of *why* Jesus was willing to endure the agony and shame of the cross. It was “for the sake of the *joy* that lay before him.” His suffering was the price he was willing to pay for the joyous outcome that he foresaw. And so it should be for us, as we struggle to “rid ourselves of every burden and sin” and seek the promised joys of heaven. Our commitment will, no doubt, require some sacrifices and may divide us from those who do not understand. But, each of us must decide for ourselves how much we are willing to give to the One who gave *everything* for us.