

20th Sunday Ordinary Time C

August 13-14, 2022

Readings: Jeremiah 38:4-10; Hebrews 12:1-4, Luke 12: 49-53

“Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth?” Coming from the mouth of Jesus, we would expect the answer to this question would be “yes.” Though we all have heard this gospel many times, it leaves us confused. Take heart- we’re not alone. Centuries ago, St. Augustine acknowledged the “obscurities of the divine Scriptures, by which God has willed to exercise us...”¹

Bl. Pope Pius XII echoed this sentiment in his landmark encyclical on biblical studies in 1943. He went so far as to say: “God wished difficulties to be scattered through the Sacred Books inspired by Him, in order that we might be urged to read and scrutinize them more intently...” believing that this would lead to “due submission of mind.”²

Would that everything was crystal clear in our world. Today’s gospel serves reminds us that it’s not the case. Jesus knew that his words would divide families. There is hardly a family today that hasn’t experienced the pain that can arise on account of the gospel. Parents assiduously pray for their children, only to discover that they have left the church as young adults. It hurts. They ponder how they failed or what they could have done to prevent this from happening.

The image of the word of God being sharper than any two-edged sword is powerful. If the gospel is indeed sharper than any two-edged sword, should we expect anything less? Jeremiah was thrown into a 20-foot-deep cistern simply because he spoke the hard truth. The city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Babylonian armies. As God’s mouthpiece, Jeremiah knew the time was not ripe to play hardball, advising surrender to spare the people’s lives. He didn’t “tickle their ears,” he spoke truth. A common theme running through all three of our readings today, though expressed in different ways, is the concept of zeal, the earnest

¹ Cf. Augustine, Ep. ad Paulinum, 149, n. 34 “Utile est autem ut de obscuritatibus divinarum Scripturarum, quas exercitationis nostrae causa Deus esse voluit...”

² See also Pope Pius XII, encyclical letter *Divino afflante spiritu*, para. #45, 30 September 1943

desire for God's honor, which motivates us to perform bold deeds, despite any and all obstacles.

The court officials' pride hindered their judgments. So disgusted were they with the prophecy, they condemned Jeremiah to the cruel death of starvation. However, Jeremiah's zeal kept him alive until he was rescued. Note that he did not always have that zeal. Remember when the Lord first called him? He answered, "Ah, Lord God. I do not know how to speak. I am too young."³ The Lord replied, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' To whomever I send you, you shall go..."

This perhaps is the first and most important lesson about zeal. It is acquired – it takes time, and it is a gift from God. Soon after complaining that he was too young, Jeremiah's perspective changed. He now says, "I found your words Lord, and I devoured them."⁴ He came full circle, so excited was he about his call. Echoing his fellow prophet Isaiah, zeal says, "Here I am, send me."⁵

In today's gospel, Jesus states that he has come to light a fire on the earth. He lights the fire, not us. Our calling is to burn with the light of Christ. God ignites the blaze. Zeal acts according to God's will—boldly, promptly, and without delay. Each act stands by itself as a sufficient service to Him. The believer goes no farther than where God is calling him or her to be, lest we become overzealous. When that occurs, the flame easily dies out.

Our zeal must always be tempered by love, faith, and prudence. Moses had an undisciplined zeal which led him to slay the Egyptian. But recall how he ended his life – he was described as the "meekest of men." Something happened. His zeal was purified, his charity increased. Moses was open-hearted towards all people and became gentler.

When our zeal is tempered with faith, we may be assured that God will not only give us the desire to achieve a certain end, but he will provide the means as well. We will not have to be impetuous like Peter, cutting

³ Cf. Jeremiah 1:6

⁴ Jeremiah 15:16

⁵ Isaiah 6:8

off the ear of the Roman guard, but will look towards discerning the will of God before we act on our own accord.

Our lesson from Hebrews exhorts us neither to grow despondent, nor to abandon the struggle. Never give up hope. To be zealous and on fire for the Lord means that we continue running the race which lies ahead, always keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. Do not be afraid to be on fire for God. The Lord will not allow you to get burned.