

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – C

While some of the parables in Luke's gospel are well known and loved today's reading is unfamiliar and will no doubt cause some concern. The symbolic 'fire' that Jesus is to bring to the earth is one that will purify hearts and will be lit by Jesus when he is on the Cross. Jesus' appearing will also stir up spiritual conflict within families because following Jesus is a sacred calling more important than maintaining family ties. In the first reading we have Jeremiah following his calling to speak the word from God rather than keep the Jewish family in the city of Jerusalem happy. The second reading from Hebrews gives something of a similar reading. Having started on the path that leads to Jesus, the letter calls it a race, we must continue considering all that Jesus did to open up the way for us.

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Jeremiah, a major prophet in Israel. He was called by God as a young man in the reign of Josiah, a good king of Judah when there were hopes for reform and a return to Godly ways. Josiah was killed in battle in 609 and with the rise of the Chaldean empire, king Nebuchadnezzar imposed his rule on Judah who sought support from Egypt. They revolted twice, in 597 and 587, which resulted in the capture and destruction of the Temple and the city, many of its inhabitants being carried off into slavery to Babylon. Jeremiah lived and worked in these final traumatic days, preaching, issuing threats of God's anger and foretelling the final disaster. He suffered greatly not only from those who considered him a defeatist because he was opposed to war as a solution to Judah's problems but also from his own inner conflicts. A man of peace he had to fight against the whole population from kings and priests to false prophets and the whole nation. He was a Job-like figure inwardly tortured by the work God had given him to do, but all this helped to purify his soul and he saw Israel's relationship with God in a new light. God looks at the heart and rewards each according to their works. So the new covenant expresses a new start, a new relationship with God, the Law will no longer be written on tablets of stone but within the hearts of the people of Israel. Jeremiah died a failure, a fugitive in Egypt, but his teachings grew in importance in helping to shape the future of Israel.

The reading, 38.4-6,8-10, comes in the section which deals with the sufferings of Jeremiah, ch.36-45. Jerusalem was besieged and Jeremiah was telling the people to surrender to the Chaldeans if not they will suffer from the sword, famine or plague. The chief men in the city saw this as undermining the moral of the people. King Zedekiah meekly gave way to the desire to put Jeremiah down and died up well. An Ethiopian eunuch spoke to the king and Jeremiah was saved. (Read 38.1-13 for the whole story.)

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 39.2-4,18, is a song of praise and a prayer for help and is a clear response to the first reading. We all in our own ways have to suffer times of reversal and dismay and this shows that we must have trust in the Lord if we hope for his protection.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter to the Hebrews. This wonderful letter to the Jewish Christians was for a time attributed to Paul's pen but now this is considered not to be the case although he is considered to have had some indirect influence on the letter's contents. It would seem from internal evidence that the letter was written about 67AD. The letter is addressed to Jewish people who have a good knowledge of the covenant God made with their people, and who became Christians. They left Jerusalem and with an uncertain faith, they yearn for the splendour of the ceremonies carried out in the Temple. They are tempted to revert to Judaism, but the writer is intent on preventing this by helping them to see their new life in Christ. They are on a new exodus to the Promised Land (heaven), with Christ, not Moses, as their leader whose one sacrifice on the Cross replaces the many sacrifices of the old priesthood. The letter is a good teaching letter for us showing the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.

The reading, 12.1-4, comes from the final section of the letter and speaks of persevering in faith. 'With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us' refers to the ancestors of the Jewish people from the time of Abraham who had such faith in God. The writer encourages his readers to cast off anything that holds them back from following the example of Christ 'who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection.' We should do this because Christ never lost heart but looked beyond the Cross when facing death 'to the joy which lay ahead of him' following this example we must be prepared to follow where Christ has led even to the point of shedding our blood.