

Homily for 20th Sunday

The central theme of today's readings is that we should courageously live out our religious convictions and principles in our lives, as Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus did, even if doing so should result in our martyrdom and turn society upside down. Jeremiah, in our first reading, is presented as experiencing the consequences of the burning word of God within him. Jeremiah's preaching divided the city and incited such opposition that people sought his death. The result was that Jeremiah was thrown into a deep, muddy cistern to die. Standing in this prophetic tradition, Paul, in the second reading, challenges the Judeo-Christians to "fight against sin" as we "keep running steadily in the race that we have started" (Heb 12:1). This fight against sin is not just the obedience to the commandments, but something deeper than that. Obedience to the law could make us complacent, but the journey towards perfection disturbs us. It is a challenge to "keep running steadily." Since Pope Pius XII, the Popes have warned us about "the sin of the century" (Pope Pius XII in 1946): the loss of sense of sin. We should pray: Disturb me, Lord, when I feel I have no sin to confess.

When we come to Jesus, we do not expect fire. But this is what we get in today's gospel. Jesus' words today are words of conflict and division. He is rather describing what will happen in this world when we follow him. In the imperfect and often unjust world in which we live, speaking the truth, standing up for what is right, is not always welcome. It often causes fire. You just said no to your teenager. "No, you're not going to the mall with your friends, when there's work to be done here at home." There's an angry comment, a slam of the bedroom door, and silence. You have done the right thing, but now there's fire. You are out with some friends, maybe at a party or at lunch period at school. One of them speaks up and cruelly demeans another person, because of their religion, race, or their sexual orientation. For a minute you think you will let it slip, but then you speak out against the comment. The people around you are surprised. Some of them hear what you are saying but others dismiss you as a hopeless fool. You have said the right thing, but you have also caused division. How wonderful it would be if following Jesus was easy. When we stand for what is right or speak the truth, how great it would be to be greeted by applause. But this is not the world in which we live. Some people can never be challenged. *Three men are travelling on a ship, when they are accosted by the Devil. The Devil proposes that if each man drops something into the sea and he cannot find it, he will be that man's slave. If the Devil does find it, however, he will eat that man up. The first man drops a pure, clear diamond, and immediately gets eaten. The second drops an expensive watch, trying to impress the Devil, and gets eaten. The third man fills a bottle with water and pours it into the sea yelling, "You think I'm a fool? Try finding that!"*

Jesus challenges us that speaking the truth and standing for what is right, even if it causes division, is not only compatible with the gospel but essential to it. None of us wants to anger or upset people. But avoiding these things cannot be our top priority. Our fundamental obligation is to speak the truth and to make choices which are right. If we do this, we will be following Jesus—even if we set things on fire. At this the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled: "Those who hope in the Lord God will regain their strength, they will sprout wings like eagles, though they run they will not grow weary, though they walk they will never tire" (Is 40:31). Jeremiah disturbed the complacent people of his day. Jesus disturbed the people of his time with his language of fire and conflict. Disturb me, Lord, when I am too careful to be politically correct. Disturb me, Lord, when I feel I have no sin to confess. Disturb me, Lord. Disturb my false security so that I might focus my attention solely on you.