

Cycle C 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1, Jer 38:4-6, 8-10

In those days, the princes said to the king: “Jeremiah ought to be put to death; he is demoralizing the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such things to them; he is not interested in the welfare of our people, but in their ruin.” King Zedekiah answered: “He is in your power”; for the king could do nothing with them. And so they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Prince Malchiah, which was in the quarters of the guard, letting him down with ropes. There was no water in the cistern, only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud.

Ebed-melech, a court official, went there from the palace and said to him: “My lord king, these men have been at fault in all they have done to the prophet Jeremiah, casting him into the cistern. He will die of famine on the spot, for there is no more food in the city.” Then the king ordered Ebed-melech the Cushite to take three men along with him, and draw the prophet Jeremiah out of the cistern before he should die.

Responsorial Psalm, Ps 40:2, 3, 4, 18

R. (14b) Lord, come to my aid!

I have waited, waited for the LORD, and he stooped toward me.

R. Lord, come to my aid!

The LORD heard my cry. He drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp; he set my feet upon a crag; he made firm my steps.

R. Lord, come to my aid!

And he put a new song into my mouth, a hymn to our God. Many shall look on in awe and trust in the LORD.

R. Lord, come to my aid!

Though I am afflicted and poor, yet the LORD thinks of me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, hold not back!

R. Lord, come to my aid!

Reading II, Heb 12:1-4

Brothers and sisters: Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God. Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

Gospel, Lk 12:49-53

Jesus said to his disciples: “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

In today's Scriptures we heard some disturbing passages...not exactly what we would call Good News. We heard about Jeremiah being thrown into a cistern left to die...Then St. Paul telling us about struggling "*against sin, but not yet resisting to the point of shedding blood*"...then in the Gospel a not very peaceful Jesus setting the earth on fire and ranting about the division He will cause even among family members. Where is the loving and merciful God in these readings?

I want to tell you a little secret. When I was in formation to become a Deacon, about a hundred years ago, my homiletics teacher responded to a question about what the theme was of that day's readings. He said, "That's simple. There is only one theme in the Scriptures every day. It is that God loves us." That's why if you ever heard one of my homilies, you know that I always try to explain what I heard in the reading that shows that God loves us. I have said it in all of the homilies I preached in the last 23 years so I wouldn't forget...that we wouldn't forget...that God loves us first and foremost above all else. So with confidence and the prayer from today's Responsorial Psalm, "*Lord, come to my aid*," I began searching in today's readings for the loving and merciful God....and, I found Him.

Today's readings continue the focus on discipleship started last week, particularly the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. God loves us so much that when He calls us to be His disciple, He tells it like it is. Our commitment to the values and principles of our faith won't be appreciated by everyone, and in fact could lead to ridicule or worse. Maybe even members of our own families won't agree with us. But God doesn't just leave us there. He knows we can't do it on our own. So He stoops down and draws us out of the pit that we find ourselves in, like He did for Jeremiah in the 1st reading. He puts us in communities of loving people throughout our lives like the 2nd reading said that "*we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*." These people are witnesses to perseverance in life's struggles and they show us the value of being committed to our faith. These are people who know how to live their lives in heroic ways....though most of the time it's in seemingly

insignificant ways that nevertheless can have a lasting impact. These are the people God wants us to be. And, this is how He accomplishes extraordinary things.

As I was pondering the readings, I thought about our recent pilgrimage to Portugal, Spain and France where 16 of us became a community of witnesses who journeyed together. All in all, our pilgrimage was what Pat and I expected: an arduous and blessed journey, while at the same time being more than we imagined...if that makes sense. Someone asked me, “in your conversations on the pilgrimage, what was said that stuck with you?” I thought about that question for days.

- I brought a book with me that I read occasionally, Richard Rohr’s Tears of Things. He says it’s his last book...he’s getting old...I can relate. In this book Richard is speaking to us about the Prophets...to understand them you have to read them completely to see their evolution from violence and fear so common in their cultures, to lamentations and sadness, and finally to God’s infinite love....we too often only see the violence and fear. Richard said, “every priest needs a prophet”... for me it became “everyone needs a prophet.” But, be careful what you wish for...Prophets don’t tell us what we want to hear. I had some brief but profound discussions about Richard Rohr and his books that stuck with me.
- We were a small but diverse group including folks from St. Andrew and other Atlanta parishes, and some from Nashville and Detroit and Spain, who brought us new perspectives. The key I think was we were comfortable enough to shuffle around at meals and other grouping times to get to know everyone pretty well.... I had many brief but profound discussions about life’s struggles and the value of being committed to our faith that stuck with me.
- In preparation to preach on the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, my prayer-conversations with Jesus stuck with me. Here’s what I heard: *“if we want to follow Jesus we need to start with the Eucharist! In Mass we need to celebrate the radical transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ Himself... but we must also celebrate the radical transformation of ourselves into the Body of*

Christ, the Church! Eucharist is a choice to do something... to take action...to fully, consciously, and actively participate in offering ourselves to follow Christ...with His love...every, single, day...with everyone. To celebrate Eucharist is an amazing and radical life changing activity because the truth is, God will transform us in ways beyond our imaginations!

- These conversations were the gifts of the pilgrimage that I would not have recognized if I hadn't heard that question...it stuck with me. That's what makes a pilgrimage!

So, you see our loving and merciful God was in today's readings...He prompted Ebed-melech to get Jeremiah out of the cistern...He convinced St. Paul to tell us that we faith-filled Christians are not alone, "*a cloud of witnesses*" will be with us as we "*keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.*" Finally, when we choose to be a disciple of Christ, when we choose to follow Jesus, He will challenge us to the very core of our being. We can count on it! But also know, God loves us and He has a plan for who He wants us to be. You see, this is how He accomplishes extraordinary things...in spite of the violence and fear, the hatred and the evil, in the world around us!

God loves us!