

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Each of today's readings invites us to consider the dichotomy and struggle between what is good and comes from God and the break or sin which separates us from him. We know the fruits of this incessant struggle: peace and justice or division and indignity of the human person. We see the experience of Jeremiah as a precise manifestation of those who reject the prophetic message of God. Jeremiah, one of the great Jewish prophets, ministered in the seventh century BCE (the common era which delineates it from the beginning of the Christian era). Jeremiah is known as the prophet of both rebuke and hope. He challenges the Jewish people to turn their hearts back to God after a long period of scandalous and unholy living. He warns of the destruction of Israel if there is not a conversion of heart. At the same time, however, Jeremiah speaks of hope and that divine favor will be with them as a response to their return to faithfulness and fidelity in following God. This thematic contrast between rebuke and hope is interwoven and paralleled throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Parenthetically, the image of the cistern serves to illustrate this contrast. The cistern or, water well, was often located in the center of the village. This denotes water's absolute importance in the sustainability of life. The enemies of Jeremiah throw him into the cistern hoping to kill him. He is saved by the righteous court official Ebed-melech who pleads his case before King Zedekiah. The cistern as a symbol of conversion and hope is echoed in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well. Jesus rebukes her and replays the indiscretions of her past life and yet because of their own encounter at the well she experiences a profound conversion of heart and change of life. Standing at the crucible of good or ill is a decisive point in how we as human beings choose to live. The prophetic voice of Jeremiah or the healing identity of Jesus helps to guide us and prod us to the wholesomeness of the good.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews, continues this motif of discernment and choice when in rather stark terms he tells them of the absolute cost of discipleship. While warning them of the real consequences of sin, he also encourages them on towards the prize that is life in Christ Jesus. St. Paul uses language with which people can so readily identify. "...persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus." In keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, we can emulate the Master who, despite all opposition and violent death, was faithful in submitting to the will of the Father. At times, this means submitting to suffering and the opposition of our fellows. The fruit of that fidelity is to sit at the right hand of the Father in glory. We believe in faith that we too at the end of this earthly life will share in the glory of everlasting life.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus speaks of coming to set the world on fire. In the ancient Scriptures, fire was used to connote God's love for us. That love of God for us is all-consuming. The fullest expression of that love comes to us in the Incarnation, the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. In coming into the world, Jesus lived like us in all things but sin and surrendered his own life so that we might live the fullness of freedom from sin and share in the gift of everlasting life. When Jesus speaks of his own baptism, he is speaking of his passion and death. He is foretelling the Father's earthly mission for him and it will not be fulfilled until his death. As Christians, we are called to help set the world on fire by our zeal and personal witness to building up the Kingdom of God in our midst.

During my recent vacation, I had the opportunity to visit the ancient cathedral in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. I was also able to concelebrate Mass there Sunday, August 4th. At the front of the cathedral is the dramatic scene of the crucifixion which you can see on the cover of this week's bulletin. One aspect that struck me was the pose of the two thieves flanking either side of Jesus. I had never seen this depiction before. The thief on the left, the "good thief", has his eyes fixed on Jesus. The other, the one who rejected Jesus's invitation to redemption, is looking down and away from him. This is a powerful example of what today's scriptures present to us: we are always given a choice. God is always desirous of being united and reconciled to us. I invite us all to reflect and meditate upon the image on the bulletin cover. May it strengthen us, nourish us, sustain us as we strive to keep our eyes on Jesus.

Father Tom