

20th Sunday per Annum - C
Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10;
Hebrews 12:1-4;
Luke 12:49-53
Little Flower - 8/18/19

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's readings offer us two challenges and hope.

We all realize that we are living in a divided world, a divided country, and a divided church. Today's reading from the Prophet Jeremiah speaks to the world in which we are living.

The princes wanted King Zedekiah to put Jeremiah to death because they did not like what Jeremiah was preaching. Jeremiah was challenging the established order. Because Zedekiah felt powerless before them, he let the princes take Jeremiah. Jeremiah was only saved through the intercession of Ebed-melech, a court official.

Today we are living in a world, a country, and a church where so many people do not want to hear anything that is contrary to or challenges what they, we, think, believe, or feel. Many people only watch cable news stations that confirm what they already believe. They then express their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings on social media in absolute terms and inflict rhetorical violence on those with whom they disagree.

The divisions in the country are also found in the Catholic Church. People follow websites that confirm what they already think, believe, or feel. Catholics tend to divide between supporters of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis. People get angry at others. Of course, Jesus prophesied this in John's Gospel: "*... in fact, the hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God*" [16:2b].

If this is the bad news, the good news is that this is one area where we can make a difference in the world. We can make a difference if, instead of demonizing those with whom we disagree politically or religiously, we listen to them respectfully and engage in dialogue rather than polemics. At the Synod on the Family, Pope Francis told the participants to speak boldly but to listen humbly. In many areas, we can make a difference if we seek the middle rather than the extremes. In many cases, the truth is somewhere between the extremes.

Today's second reading proclaimed that "*we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.*" This verse should give us hope and consolation. The great cloud of witnesses surrounding us is the communion of saints, all those who have gone before us in faith. As I remind people at every funeral, there is an unbreakable bond between the communion of saints in heaven and the church here on earth. They are witnesses to us of what it means to live a Christian life. However, they also constantly intercede for us in heaven. Like God, they are with us on our journey of life and faith.

Finally, in today Gospel, Jesus says, "*I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!*" If we can make a difference through listening and speaking respectfully to others and about others who disagree with us, we can make an even bigger difference through evangelization. Most of us are aware that the numbers of practicing Catholics are declining. This is true in most other Christian churches as well. I have read Catholic perspectives as well as non-Catholic perspectives on what is happening. Interestingly both seem to agree that if our churches are to survive and thrive, we all have to become true disciples of Jesus through encounter with him, through growth in faith, and through discipleship building. This is the mission Jesus gave each and every one of us. Jesus calls us to be passionate about evangelization.

My brothers and sisters, we can hear or read passages from the Gospels multiple times before they finally resonate with us. The final verse of John 16 should give us great hope in these troubled times. Jesus said, "*In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world*" [33].