**20th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C**

**Reading I: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10**

In hot arid climates, water is both more important for life and less easily obtained. During winter, rain was collected in large underground cisterns with narrow necks to reduce evaporation. During the summer, the reservoir would be drawn upon and when empty used for prisoners. During 598 B.C. Jerusalem was effectively besieged by the Assyrians. There was no food or water in the city and the prophet Jeremiah was pessimistic for the future. The King (Zedekiah) was weak and the city authorities silenced Jeremiah by interning him in a cistern.

We use this reading today because of the fact that Jeremiah’s preaching brought him rejection and suffering. Thus, the passion of Jeremiah foreshadows the passion of Jesus, intimated in the gospel reading.

Throughout his book, the sufferings of Jeremiah are described with a grim realism that recalls the description of the Passion of Jesus. Jeremiah is abandoned to his enemies and is powerless. It is not surprising that Christians have seen him as a type of Christ.

**Responsorial Psalm: 40:1-3, 17**

The reference to the "miry bog" in the second stanza links the psalm with the first reading. However, the main point today is the deliverance of the psalmist, whereas the main point of the Old Testament reading, as we saw from the caption and the gospel, lies in the rejection that results from preaching the word of God.

**Reading II: Hebrews 12:1-4**

This is the exhortation concluding the roll call of Old Testament heroes of the faith. They were "witnesses" to the power of faith to endure.

The author pictures the Old Testament heroes as a crowd of spectators standing by a racetrack and cheering on those who are now running the same race is they did in their day.

Jesus is the pacemaker who has preceded us and obtained his prize. In his earthly life he was the pioneer because he initiated the way of faith—the way through suffering to glory (v. 2b)—and its perfecter because he completed it, thus enabling believers to run the same race, through suffering to glory. The suffering the author and readers have in mind is that which Christians were beginning to experience in the 60s-70s A.D.

After his survey of Old Testament figures of persevering faith (chapter 11) the author of Hebrews returns to the present and exhorts his readers to persevere in their own faith, regardless of cost. Christian existence in this world is likened to a school of endurance and a toughening through hardship in which the training and formation are divine.

The 'cloud of witnesses' refers to the saints of the Old Testament presented as spectators in a stadium. They have run their race. They are keen and involved fans of this race of Christians, willing them to persevere. Of course, the great race has already been won: Jesus is the winner. But, like our popular city marathons, what matters is to participate and to finish the course.

Jesus is 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (v. 2). 'Pioneer' here means chief or leader, offering an example of his whole life, sufferings brought to a climax on the cross, knowing that the reward of divine exaltation awaited him afterward in heaven. As such he is an example (greater than the entire 'cloud' of Old Testament examples) for Christians who suffer in this world but are assured in faith of the promised reward awaiting them in heaven (11:1, 13-16). If Christ endured so much at the hands of his sinful adversaries, we ought to take heart from his example and remain firm in the face of our adversaries (v. 3). In v.4' sin' is especially, but not exclusively, the sin of apostasy.

The statement, 'you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood,' is perhaps still athletic terminology: you have not yet given of your utmost. But the message is clear: the Christian, too, like his Master, must be ready to struggle - perhaps even unto death - against all obstacles on the road to God.

**Gospel: Luke 12:49-53**

The reading falls into two parts. The first consisting of two sentences in the Missal (vv. 49-50) speaks of Christ's divine destiny to endure suffering. This unit is unique to Luke.

It consists of two sayings in the 1st person singular. In the first, Jesus speaks of his work as bringing fire to the earth. In the second he speaks of his impending martyrdom as a Baptism both of which signs he anticipates with dread. Baptism as a sign of commitment is easy to comprehend; fire less so. In fact, in the Old Testament fire and water were often together as an ordeal. See, for example Psalm 66;12 and Isaiah 43;2 There are features which mark fire and water as opposites and so both together could indicate totality.

John Baptist also associated baptism and fire with the Judgment (see Matt 5;11-12 and Luke 3;16-18) but he never imagined that the Messiah would have to endure it.

The first saying may well be authentic to Jesus, expressing his consciousness of prophetic mission. The second saying however, which refers to his martyrdom as a baptism (cf. Mark 10:38), could be a reflection by the later Church as interpreting the Crucifixion as a total commitment to the Father’s will. This identity of Baptism and Crucifixion can be seen in Romans 6;3-11.

This second saying is probably an amplification of the first authentic "I saying" by the early Church. The "fire" (a symbol of the judgment at the end of the age) that Jesus came to cast upon the earth will be his challenge to human beings to choose their side.

The Church's additional "1 saying," with its explicit reference to Jesus' death, will mean that after Easter Jesus' original message was replaced by the Church's preaching of the cross. This message, too, calls for a decision.

The second part of three sentences (vv. 51-53) speaks of the breakup of families caused by Christ and his message. This second block of material is paralleled in Matthew 10:34-35. This tradition also reflects an apostolic tradition going back to the eighth century B.C. (Micah 7;1-6)

"Social disruption has always been associated in the oriental mind with the reign of terror which will precede the age of salvation, and it is not surprising that it figures in Jewish apocalyptic as one of the signs of the end"

It is quite possible that this saying goes back to Jesus himself or it may owe its existence to the post-Easter community. The situation, however, was found both in Jesus' ministry as a result of his call to decision and in the post-Easter community as a result of its preaching of the cross.

By putting together these two traditions—the two "I sayings" with the saying about family divisions—Luke shows that the breakup of families is a direct consequence of the Christian message.