



## Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time C August 18, 2019

- ◆ Fire-starters
- ◆ Jeremiah, a Persecuted Prophet

This Sunday's Gospel begins with Jesus saying the following words:

*"I have come to set the earth on fire."*

Commenting on the above verse, Scripture scholar Patricia Sanchez writes:

*Throughout the course of human history, there have been individuals who have distinguished themselves because they have dared to be different. With their unique insights and perceptions, these people have dared to examine commonly held principles and to call into question ideas which had been generally accepted for centuries. Because discord is often unpleasant, these individuals have frequently borne the brunt of society's irritation and rejection; but whether for better or for worse, they have changed the times and people among whom they lived. Taking a cue from the gospel for today's liturgy, perhaps we might think of these outstanding individuals as fire-starters!*

*One such fire-starter was **Galileo Galilei** (1564-1642). A scientist and mathematician who taught at the University of Padua, Galileo dared to question the centuries-old, church-supported belief that the sun revolved around the earth. Because he defended Copernicus' theories, he was forced by the Inquisition to recant his teachings in 1633. But in 1638, despite the opposition of the church, he forcefully restated his earlier discoveries. Only in 1835 were his writings removed from the Index (list of censored books).*

*Another fire-starter was **Charles Darwin** (1809-1882). Because his theories of evolution challenged the current theological, scriptural and scientific interpretations of his day, he was rejected outright by many of his contemporaries. In this country, a high school biology teacher named John T. Scopes was tried for daring to introduce his students to the idea of evolution. Prosecuted by William Jennings Bryant and defended by Charles Darrow in 1925, Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100, but the fire never stopped raging.*

*When **Abraham Lincoln** (1809-1865) dared to question the institution of slavery and issued his Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, he started a fire of freedom and truth which should never be extinguished. In the former Soviet Union, **Alexander Solzhenitsyn** (1918-2008) risked his life to ignite the fires of outrage against an oppressive totalitarian regime. Unjustly imprisoned (1945-1956) and finally deported (1974), he continued to write, teach and inflame the hearts of others with new ideas. Close to home, the **Berrigan brothers**, Philip and Daniel, dared to question the morality of war, nuclear weapons, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. While their methods were extreme, even illegal at times, they succeeded, nevertheless, in sparking the fires of discontent among their fellow clergy and students. As a result, Americans began to reconsider their options for peace and to take a firmer stance against war.*

*In today's Lucan gospel, Jesus declared himself to be a fire-starter: "I have come to light a fire on the earth!" He had come to upset the order of the day, to question the status quo, to "rock the boat," to cause people to think, to question to examine themselves and their ideas in the light of his words and works. Jeremiah (first reading) offered a similar challenge to his contemporaries as did the "cloud witnesses" referred to in the Hebrews' text (second reading).*

*As is evident in all three readings, those who would ignite the fire of truth among their contemporaries are thereby often burdened with suffering. Rather than lose heart, contemporary fire-starters can draw strength from the words of the Hebrews' author: "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus who inspires and perfects our faith .... Do not grow despondent or abandon the struggle!"*

[Used with permission. *The Word We Celebrate; Commentary on the Sunday Lectionary Years A, B, C*, by Patricia Sanchez, Sheed & Ward publisher (9-1-89)]

Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King and Archbishop Romero could be added to the above list.

## **Jeremiah, another prophet who was ignored, persecuted and killed for the words he spoke**

Commenting mostly on today's first reading, Fr. Denis McBride, CSsR, writes:

### ***Jeremiah, the prophet***

*The place is the city of Jerusalem. The year is 588 B.C. The city is surrounded by Babylonian soldiers who are feared as "the foe from the north." All the outlying defense posts of the city have already fallen and the survivors have been thrown into exile. From the walls of Jerusalem the people can see the Babylonians—their weapons, their uniforms, their faces, their intent. The people under siege hope that God will intervene and save them from the coming catastrophe.*

*Inside the walls of Jerusalem, there is a prophet called Jeremiah. Years before, he had predicted the catastrophe: he had sounded the alarm but everyone had ignored him. He even walked the streets of Jerusalem with a wooden yoke around his neck to warn people that they would soon be under the yoke of the enemy. And when false prophets chased him and broke the wooden yoke, Jeremiah put on a new one made of iron. He uses pantomime to get across his point; he screams, he prays, he shouts, he warns, he weeps. Jeremiah complains that all the reaction he gets is stonewalling: "They have made their faces harder than rock." (5:3)*

*Wherever he goes, Jeremiah is always fighting the establishment: the king, the princes, the army, the politicians, the hired prophets. He shatters their fragile serenity; he increases their collective anxiety. They try to discredit him, they call him a madman; they throw him into prison in the guards' courtyard.*

*But even there, Jeremiah is busy! Instead of wailing at the walls, he tells the soldiers that they are wasting their time practicing their swordplay and spear-throwing. They might as well play darts for all the good it will do. And as we heard in the first reading, the king's war cabinet complains: "He is unquestionably disheartening the remaining soldiers in the city, and all the people, too, by talking like this." Jeremiah is clearly no good as a military chaplain so he is thrown into a well of mud. Only when a black slave from Ethiopia pleads with the king does Jeremiah get hauled out of solitary confinement and thrown back into prison. Where he continues where he left off!*

## ***Prophetic conflict***

*Jeremiah is a pacifist. He tells the people not to fight but to surrender. He has a religious reason for doing this: he believes the people are defenseless because God has withdrawn his protection. He believes the people are responsible for what is happening because they have forgotten their promises to God. To forget their promises is to bury their identity as the people of God; to forget is to deny the past and the present its meaning.*

*He rails against the false prophets who give easy answers to difficult questions, who appeal to popular taste at its lowest, who cheat people with their cheap optimism. Jeremiah warns the people: "They speak of peace when there is no peace." But the people do not listen to him and Jeremiah is hurt and angry. He is angry at God for making him the prosecutor of his own people. As a witness of God, he becomes the victim of the people. Jeremiah is everyone's favourite victim. Even God's. As he complains in prayer:*

*You have overpowered me; you were the stronger.  
I am a laughing-stock all day long, they all make  
fun of me... Why ever did I come out of the womb  
to see toil and sorrow and end my days in shame?*

*Jeremiah is the supreme example of the prophet who is isolated because of his fidelity to the word of God. He is in conflict with his own people, with himself, even with God. It's all very well to say what you mean, but if what you mean is not what is wanted, what happens to you? What happens when the word that you speak and the values that you cherish cause division even within your own family? And Jesus warns in today's Gospel that even families will be divided among themselves because of him.*

### ***The death of the prophet***

*The opposition that Jeremiah brought proceeded from his fidelity to his mission. The fire that Jesus brought proceeded from his fidelity to his mission. Neither of them introduced conflict as a way of passing the time. They both paid the price with their own lives. Jesus warns that his own disciples must face the real conflict that the Gospel will surely bring. Standing for something inevitable means standing against a lot of other things. And as Jesus suggests when the lines are drawn up, there can be a lot of familiar faces on the opposite side.*

*Every community needs its prophets. The prophets today don't get treated any better than in the past. They rarely appear as popular figures because their popularity ratings are rarely high. They are not appointed by the community, so the community cannot sack them when they don't like what they hear. Often they end up like Archbishop Romero—slaughtered by the power that fears them. In the end, the death of the prophet is his last accusation and challenge. We must pick up where he left off.*

(Used with permission granted by Denis McBride CSsR, *Seasons of the Word*.)

#### Reflection questions

- ◆ Can you recall a time when you (or someone you know) fought against the prevailing opinion?
- ◆ Might those who warned us about climate change decades ago be prophets on this issue?

Have a blessed week,

*Fr. Aaron*