

Readings: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/081819.cfm>

*Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Heb 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53*

We have all been taught, and rightly so, that God is love. And Jesus, the Prince of Peace, came to the world as agent of peace, joy and love. We see Jesus as a gentle shepherd and a kind, selfless teacher, who makes space for children and reaches out to the marginalized. These images and themes of mercy are major elements of Luke's Gospel (the one we mainly read from in this liturgical year (C).) The passage proclaimed on this 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, however, presents a different — perhaps even startling — facet of Jesus' teachings. The Prince of Peace asks, "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on earth?" Uncharacteristic of Jesus!

In light of both readings, the first and the gospel, the following theme shines forth: the messenger must become the message. And as one reflects on this theme, our daily experience reveals that it is problematic. For example, we accept Jesus' message to love everyone, yet we tend to exclude some. We acknowledge Jesus's message of fidelity in the vows we make, yet we are tempted to compromise. We accept Jesus' message of justice for all, yet we attempt peaceful coexistence with injustice. It becomes apparent in the first reading that Jeremiah's person and his message overlapped. Though Jeremiah wishes it otherwise, he preached that the end of Jerusalem unavoidably had to come. Logically, the enemies of the prophet realized that, in order to kill the message, they had to kill the messenger, but Jeremiah would not compromise with his mission. The people's infidelity had become so enormous that the city of Jerusalem, especially its temple, would suffer catastrophic destruction.

In the gospel, Jesus' person and his message overlapped. Jesus preached that the divided household was the uncommitted household. He insisted that one could not have it both ways- one was either for the kingdom or against the kingdom. Logically, his enemies believed that to kill the messenger was to kill the message. Paradoxically, the death of the messenger ensured the ongoing life of the message. The cross on Calvary was proof positive that the messenger must become the message.

Looking at ourselves and to our own familiar experiences, we notice that God chooses us for different roles and responsibilities in life; for instance, husband and wife as the messengers of God's love for the world. Experience shows that some married messengers have not yet become the message. God calls parents as bearers of his Word for their children. Lack of time and care for family reveals that some messengers have not yet become the message. God commissions all us as his messengers of the human dignity of each person. But our gossip and backbiting prove our capitulation and acknowledge that, as messengers, we have not yet become the message.

Our Christian life is often confronted with hard realities and crucial choices. Any right choice we make calls for heroism and determination. We may even be torn between our faithfulness to God and the demands of our family and friends. The fire of Jesus purifies us from indifference and superficiality and leads us to experience the freedom of the children of God. The fire Jesus wants, is the fire of loyalty and commitment, because Jesus did not come to bring an easy peace by sweeping problems under the rug and having us look the other way. Jesus came to bring a spiritual fire to undo the power of evil in our world and in ourselves and to remake the face of the earth. The fire of faith and conviction gives our life energy, direction and definition. Because society's values have changed and confused, ours do not have to. Because people are unsure of right and wrong, unsure about what makes deep human fulfillment, we do not have to be. Because people have become casual about commitments and loyalties, we do not have to be.

None of us wants to anger or upset people. But avoiding these things cannot be our top priority. Our fundamental obligation is to speak the truth and to make choices that are right. If we do this, we will be following Jesus, even if we set things on fire. It is the cost of discipleship.

Do you sometimes allow that flame to go out or to go dim in order to avoid other fires of discord, that following Christ inevitably bring? Can you stand fraternal correction? And with what motive do you carry out the message? Always do it with love and charity.

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