

20th Sunday in Ordinary time C/2007

Very often we feel disturbed and sometimes annoyed when people interfere in our business, when they put their nose in what we consider to be our private life. When facing such people, our spontaneous reaction is to get rid of them, to remove them from our circle of influence so that we may stay alone, where we are, with our ways of being, thinking and doing things.

Such a reaction is what we find in today's first reading. In fact, Jeremiah has just criticized the king and his entourage for giving too much weight to political structures and forgetting that, as God's people, they are protected and should count more on God than on military organizations. As a result, Jeremiah is persecuted and threatened to death. But God in his bounty did not leave him in the hands of his enemies, but rather delivered him and saved his life.

What happened to Jeremiah was just an expression of the fate reserved for all those to whom God gives a particular mission. This was the case for the prophets in the past and it was for Jesus who, in today's Gospel, predicts his passion and death. This fate, too, will be that of his disciples and all those who follow him. Suffering and pain are part of the Christian life.

First of all, Jesus speaks of himself, about the baptism of fire he has to undergo. Baptism of fire means the experience of suffering and cross he has to go through before he triumphs in the resurrection. But all that provokes in him tension and anguish until it is accomplished.

After that, Jesus speaks of his coming into the world and his message. He has come to set the earth on fire and he wishes it were already blazing. To better understand these words, we have to remember that for the Jews, fire was often the symbol of judgment. In this perspective, Jesus considers the coming of his kingdom as a time of judgment and challenge to the world. He comes to purify the world of its sins, and build it anew. He comes to shake up the life of many so that they abandon their life of the past and turn to God. As everybody is shaken up, there is more tension than peace.

In order to illustrate that claim, Jesus evokes the opposition and the division that the choice made for the sake of his name provokes between the members of a same family, the growing clash that occurs between one generation and another because of him, and the dispute between the siblings and their families by alliance because of the values of his kingdom. All that has to happen so that each one might show clearly how he belongs to Jesus. It means, also, that to belong to Jesus presupposes the acceptance of suffering for the sake of his name.

In this suffering, however, we are not alone. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who, before us went through the same things, but triumphed because of their fidelity to God, says the second reading. They are witnesses to us in a double sense, because they have witnessed their confession to Christ and they are now witnesses of our performance today. That is why, for the writer of the letter to Hebrews, the Christian is like a runner in a stadium. He has to run

and to succeed. The thing, however, is that the crowd of the spectators are all these famous people of the past who have won the crown. What, then, would an athlete not do to double his effort if he knew that in the stadium some famous Olympic champions were watching him? Moreover, what athlete would run fast if he is loaded with burdens? For that very reason, any Christian willing to win the race should get rid of the burden of sin, otherwise the race will be a painful sight to watch.

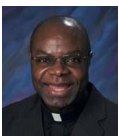
The examples of the martyrs, who gave their life for the sake of God's kingdom without counting the cost, should give us courage to persevere until we win the victory. The example of Christ, himself, who endured opposition and cross, despising its shame, in order to save us, should stimulate us.

As it appears, the purpose of this text is to bring us to not give up too soon and so easily in our struggle against sin and in our suffering. If the heroes of the past went through the same things to make their faith possible, why cannot we do the same as well? If Jesus Christ, the son of living of God, has died on the cross to make such a faith in him possible, such a treasure cannot be lightly discarded. A heritage like that is not something that a man can just hand down tarnished.

All that helps understand what the writer of the text to the Hebrews says, "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood". In other words, compared with those who suffered before, our situation is better. Not that our suffering and fight is lighter, but at least we are assured of victory through the examples of those who triumphed before us.

But, why shall we accept all those sufferings and pains? We have to accept all that, because our goal is worthwhile. In fact, as Christians, we are not like a tourist, who returns each night to the place he starts. We are pilgrims who are forever on the way until we meet Christ. Our life is not a dead end; it is going somewhere to the encounter with Christ. Christ is the goal of our journey and the companion of our way. He is the one who we go to meet and the one with whom we travel every day.

For that, we have to keep our eyes fixed on him as we run the race. He is like a good coach who can inspire us and perfects our faith and self-confidence. No team is going to succeed without a coach who observes every player and corrects the technique of each. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the good coach of our team. Let ask him to teach us to trust him in our trouble and struggle so that we may not miss the crown he has prepared for us. God bless you all.



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Jeremiah 38, 4-6, 8-10; Hebrews 12, 1-4; Luke 12, 49-53