

## Keep me aflame, Lord !

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 18 August 2019 ....

Justice Sunday

Readings: Jer 38:4-6, 8-10; Heb 12:1-4; Lk 12:49-53

*“I came to cast fire upon the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!”* (Lk 12:49)

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Celebrating ‘Justice Sunday’, the readings could be seen and interpreted from the perspective of the mission of justice, which every Christian is bound to be committed to, depending on the call that s/he has received from God. Prophet Jeremiah can be viewed from the prism of justice. Called to be God’s “mouth” (see Jer 15:19) at the early age of 22, Jeremiah is regarded as one of the greatest prophets of old. God appointed and anointed him to prophesy against the kings and people of Judah who were more interested in gaining political power and personal property rather than devoting themselves to things spiritual and religious. Thus, Jeremiah invested all his attention and energy to calling his people back to God—only to face ridicule, scorn, persecutions, and finally death. The incident described in today’s passage occurred during the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians around the year 588 BC. In their political ploys to gain power, while the princes and noblemen urged King Zedekiah to ally with powerful Egypt and other small kingdoms against the great superpower, Babylon, by contrast Prophet Jeremiah advised the king to simply pay tribute in order to stall further evil and destruction. By refusing to heed Jeremiah’s advice, when Egypt refused to help, Jerusalem was captured and destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. Judah lost her independence forever, and the city and its most treasured Temple, was ruined. The king, princes and the soldiers would later escape death by secretly going through a breach in the city wall by night (see 2 Kings 25:4).
2. Since his prophetic viewpoint differed from theirs, the powerful princes and noblemen considered Jeremiah to be a traitor and opponent. Hence, they sought not only to silence him but to slay him. Opting for a bloodless, yet cruel, murder, they seek permission from the king to put Jeremiah to death. Spineless and weak as he is, King Zedekiah says, “Here he is; he is in your hand; for the king is powerless against you” (v.5). Ironically, the king seems to be bowing down to his subjects and soldiers! Anyway, Jeremiah’s adversaries lower him down with ropes into a muddy well seeking to let him die of neglect, hunger and thirst. Interestingly, Edebmelech the Ethiopian—a pagan servant of the king—pleads with Zedekiah for saving the life of Jeremiah. The king relents. Jeremiah is saved ... only for the present. He will later suffer many more persecutions. Noteworthy in this passage is Jeremiah’s fidelity to God’s word and the divine will even when his prophetic message is rejected and his own life is threatened with dangers and death. Jeremiah continues prophesying since God’s word burns within him “like a fire” (see Jer 5:14; 20:9).
3. Though Jeremiah is a great prophet, he cannot be compared to God’s son, Jesus, *The Prophet par excellence*, who suffers much more than all the prophets before him. Jesus will be rejected, persecuted and crucified. Today’s gospel passage is not easy to understand. Jesus says: “I came to cast *fire* upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!” (v.49). As a religious symbol ‘fire’—like all other symbols—is bipolar and can

be understood in many ways. On the positive side, fire is one of the five *mahābhūtas* symbolizing God's power and the Spirit's presence. In Genesis, it is God's first creation as sun, moon and stars. Exodus narrates that God met Moses as a burning bush and later led the Israelites as a pillar of fire. From the Bible and also the Vedas we know that sacrifices were consumed by fire. But, on the negative side, fire burns and destroys. The 'fire' that Jesus came to bring is zeal for the accomplishment of God's Kingdom. Jesus desires that this fire must inflame the whole being of those who dare call themselves 'Disciples of Christ'. Thus, Jesus speaks of the 'cost of discipleship', so to say, with those who commit themselves 100% to him being in danger of facing persecutions from outsiders, and, even worse, derision and division from 'insiders' their own family members: father against son, mother against daughter, etc.

### **Linking the Second Reading to the Theme:**

The second reading concludes what, in last week's reading, seemed to be the 'roll call of heroes of faith'. Jesus is seen here as: "the *pioneer* and *perfecter* of our faith". Like athletes who strip down to the barest minimum for races, so too we "should throw off everything that hinders us, especially sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race." Jesus is pioneer because "he endured the cross" and "hostility against himself". By so doing, he is our torchbearer. He has completed the race and passes the baton-torch to us to race in his footsteps. Jesus' life is the epitome of prophetic passion for justice, truth and peace—brokered through his blood on the cross.

**The responsorial psalm** (40): is one of thanksgiving for deliverance and also a plea for help: "Lord, come to my aid!" The words: "He drew me from the deadly pit, from the miry clay," is obvious reference to the first reading.

**Saint of the Day:** St Albert Hurtado, SJ (1901-1952), whose feast we celebrate today, is a good model of one who fought for social justice and spent his life among the poor of Chile. He is the founder of the '*Hogar de Cristo*', Spanish, for 'Home of Christ' shelters for the homeless poor. His provocative book: *Is Chile a Catholic Country?* (1941) attacked materialism and the way it aggravated the plight of the poor. He said, "Injustice causes far more evil than can be repaired by charity." Three of his books—*Social Humanism* (1947), *The Christian Social Order* (1947) and *Trade Unions* (1950)—highlighted the Church's social teachings. He died on August 18, 1952.

**In Lighter Vein:** The founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, was fondly called '*Inigo*' by family and friends. *Inigo* derives from the Latin *ignis* meaning fire. At the Jesuit headquarters in Rome, there's a metal, life-sized statue of Ignatius bearing the inscription: "*Ignite, omnia!* Go, set the world on fire!" A fire extinguisher stands on the wall behind the statue. On one of my trips to Rome, a wise and witty Jesuit pointed to Ignatius' statue and said, "*He* wanted us to set the world on fire," and added, tongue-in-cheek, "But, today, *We* go around with fire extinguishers!"

**Reflection:** "You are a temple of the Holy Spirit," Paul reminds us (1 Cor 6:19). Does the fire still burn brightly within the temple of my body? Or, am I a mediocre Jesuit, a *thanda* religious/priest, a cold Christian? On Justice Sunday, let me pledge to keep the fire of God's Spirit burning brightly within me, around me. Let me/us pray: "Keep me/us aflame, Lord!"

\*\*\*\*\*