

20th Sunday Ordinary Time

August 13-14, 2016

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

Just perhaps as we are settling in on this simply beautiful summer weekend, enjoying a little time off, we are shaken out of our complacency with this weekend's readings. The Church does not desire to be the proverbial skunk at the garden party, trust me. But in her role as teacher, the Church is called to faithfully transmit the truth in season and out, just as were the prophets of old.

There is a common thread in all three readings today from Jeremiah, the Letter to the Hebrews and the Gospel from St. Luke. That common thread, expressed in different ways, is quite simply **zeal**. When viewed in its totality, the Gospel passage is not quite as negative as it may seem at first glance. What is zeal and how are we presented with its challenge in today's readings?

Zeal is the earnest desire for God's honor, which leads us to perform bold and sometimes strenuous deeds on His behalf, despite all obstacles. As a great spiritual writer last century taught, the "first motive of zeal is that God deserves to be loved above all things. The second motive is that we should imitate our Lord Jesus Christ."¹

In the first reading from Jeremiah, we come face to face with the prophet's zeal. He was delivering to the kings a message they most certainly did not want to hear. The kings tried to play off one kingdom against another, so that Judah could become stronger. Jeremiah, being the mouthpiece of the Lord, knew that the time was not ripe to play hardball and advised the leaders not to resist.

But as so often is the case, their own pride got in the way, and they were so disgusted with Jeremiah's prophecy that they had him

¹ Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Part III, chap. 21

thrown into a cistern to die the cruel death of starvation. But Jeremiah's zeal kept him going until he was rescued. He did not always have this zeal. Remember when the Lord first called him he said, "Ah my Lord God. I do not know how to speak I am too young." The Lord replied, "Say not you are too young."

This is the first and most important lesson about zeal. It is acquired, thus it takes time even as it is a gift from God. Jeremiah had zeal, and soon after we find him complaining that he was too young instead of saying as we hear him elsewhere, "When I found your words, Lord, I devoured them." This made him so excited and he went full circle. "Here I am send me."

In our Gospel, you will notice that Jesus states he has come to light a fire on the earth. Notice that Jesus lights the flame, not us. Our job is to burn with the light of Christ, but God ignites the blaze.

Zeal acts according to God's will, boldly, promptly, and without delay. It allows each act to stand alone, as a sufficient service to Him, not trying to collect all the acts in the manner of a prize. Instead, zeal breeds more zeal, but places itself at God's service, seeing the acts as a means and not an end. It is always tempered by love, faith and patience.

Moses had an undisciplined zeal that led him to slay the Egyptian in a fit of rage, even if motivated by a sense of justice. But you will recall that he ended his life being described as the "meekest of men." His zeal was purified and refined, and this was done by means of his charity. He opened his heart and became gentler. Yes, zeal should be ardent, but it is not a sudden impetus. "Zeal should be free from all excessively human self-seeking; to be so, it must be enlightened, patient, meek, and disinterested."²

² Garrigou-Lagrange, *op.cit*

When we temper our zeal with faith, we may be assured that God will give us not only the desire to achieve our end, but the means to attain it. We need not be impetuous as were the apostles when they wanted to call down fire upon their enemies, but instead we look to the Lord *before* we act on our own accord.

Our second reading from Hebrews exhorts us not to grow despondent or to abandon the struggle all together. We must simply keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. This is our greatest defense against an overzealousness that cannot withstand the passage of time.

That too can plague some, especially the young and idealistic. Zeal and passion also need to be tempered, lest we get carried away. Or more often, people's zeal is impossible to sustain and they quickly fade. I think of the lesson of the tortoise and the hare. It is a wise lesson. "Don't brag about your lightning pace, for Slow and Steady won the race!"