

20th Sunday of the Year (C)

August 18, 2019

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

Psalm 40

Hebrews 12:1-4

Luke 12:49-53

This last week, Simone Biles caught everybody's attention. At the national gymnastics championship, she accomplished the impossible. This young lady did a "triple twisting double somersault." She flipped twice, rocketed off the ground, spun her body, and really for a moment, looked as if she was defying gravity. Simone Biles faced some incredible odds and succeeded. To be tried by fire, to be an example for others, this is Simone Biles at the age of 22. I find this to be a good example of what we find in the sacred word today, that is, living with a passion, a fire-in-the-belly!

One of the most repeated phrases in all of the scriptures is "Don't be afraid." Why would God say that so often, unless there is something about our work that is difficult, demanding, challenging. More than anything God wishes to put his people in touch with the truth, to see ever more clearly. Jesus comes into our human lives, he embodies the presence of God, the energy of God. He says to us today, "I want to get a fire going on this earth." With passion, Jesus teaches, preaches, heals, Jesus challenges, Jesus lifts up. He brings us the truth about God, the truth about our human lives.

More than anything, Jesus wants the truth to begin to work in our lives, and so he says, "I have come to set the earth on fire." Fire represents the way that truth works in people's lives. Fundamentally, fire destroys whatever is not permanent, perhaps what ought not be there. If we were to look for purity in a metal, we would subject it to extraordinary heat. Whatever is not true to the quality of that metal is burned away and what is left is pure gold. And so, the scriptures frequently use the image of fire as purification. Jesus longs to free people from all illusions, half truths, things that are not real, or simply wrong. Jesus knows the process, he is traveling to Jerusalem where he himself will soon go through the process.

The opening lesson focuses upon Jeremiah, a pretty tortured character. His life consisted in coming to terms with the inescapable

word of God, finding ways to speak to the people and living with the hazardous consequences. Speaking the truth, Jeremiah finds himself deep in the mud in a dark cistern. Everything looks hopeless until a pagan figure, Ebed-meleck comes along. He recognizes the truth and entreats the king to release Jeremiah. Perhaps the message here is that we cannot stop the truth, we cannot bury the truth. The truth has a life of its own.

Finally, in this short gospel passage, Jesus uses the image of very intimate relationships: parents, spouses, children, siblings. When truth comes into our lives it will impact not only ourselves but the relationships that are so important to us. We come to that truth within ourselves, we sense what is right and good, and we naturally, want to share that with others. There will be those willing to listen, there will be those who will push us away. That interaction is meant to challenge us to see the truth that Jesus teaches. Living with someone who is not interested, is an opportunity to see the truth more clearly. And then, discern to what extent am I willing to sacrifice for that truth.

For our Christian faith to be real and genuine, it must rest upon the person and the gospel of Christ Jesus. As the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, we run the race with confidence, and even though there are obstacles, Christ assures us of victory.

Nourished and challenged by the sacred word, we receive Eucharist and begin another new week. My prayer for you and for me is that we leave here with a greater passion for Christ and a fire-in-the-belly for the truth he teaches!