

14 AUGUST, 2022

On some days the Gospel message for the day is immediately perceived as good news. This is not one of those days. Today the Gospel message is “Get ready to fight” Some people are more inclined towards track and field sports than toward combat sports, and for them the message might better be expressed in the terms that today’s Epistle from chapter 12 of Hebrews uses, a warning to get ready to run a long race. That said, the words of today’s Gospel from chapter 12 of Luke are unmistakably combative: don’t expect peace, quiet and domestic tranquility. Expect a fight.

Today’s Lesson, or First Reading, is taken from the section of the Book of Jeremiah that some people call “The Passion of Jeremiah” The Prophet Jeremiah was certainly one of the Saints of Old Testament, and “Gone with Wind’s” Rhett Butler was not even a fictional saint, but in reading chapters 37-45 of Jeremiah I thought of a scene early in “Gone with the Wind” in which Rhett Butler infuriates a group of enthusiastic young fire eaters by telling them that the South cannot possibly win the war it is so rashly starting. Enthusiasm only goes so far, as a substitute for muscle. In chapters 37-45 of Jeremiah, the Prophet infuriates a group of enthusiastic fire eaters by telling them that Judah cannot possibly win the war it got itself into by allying with Egypt against the Babylonian Empire. Judah was a tough little lightweight, and Egypt was a heavyweight, albeit a flabby and badly out of shape heavyweight, but Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon was a lean, fit, powerful, and very nasty heavyweight. This wasn’t going to end well, and Jeremiah knew it.

King Zedekiah knew it too. That is why he asked Jeremiah to pray for a miracle. The Lord, however, does not perform His wonders at our request. It is deeply presumptuous to rely on miracles to make up for our bad decisions. The commander of the 16th Century’s “Spanish Armada” was being sarcastic about King Philip’s absurd plan when he said “We set sail in confident expectation of a miracle”, but Zedekiah really expected a miracle. Jeremiah told him, in so many words, “you’re not going to get one”. Jeremiah’s blunt message that the Lord was not going to rescue Judah from the consequences of its stupidity was not well received by those who supposed that a Prophet’s job was just being the people’s cheerleader. As the war went exactly the way Jeremiah said it would, and the Babylonian army prepared to besiege Jerusalem, Jeremiah attempted to leave the City and return to his home village. The army commanders, angry at Jeremiah for being right instead of at themselves for being wrong, accused Jeremiah of desertion, and tossed him into a muddy cistern to die miserably by inches. As you heard, a Cushite (from today’s Ethiopia) court official managed to rescue Jeremiah.

After this Sunday’s passage, matters go from bad to worse. Jeremiah tells the king that, even now, surrender to overwhelming odds would not be dishonorable, and would spare the people complete disaster. With a warped notion of heroism, the king refuses Jeremiah’s continued good advice. His warped vision, fatally confusing courage with mere stubbornness, causes total disaster for his family and his people. The royal family is mostly wiped out, and the people crushed. Jeremiah advises peacefully submitting to Babylon, and waiting to see what the Lord

has in store for His People, whom He has not forgotten, despite the stubborn stupidity of their leaders. The die hards, insanely, resort to guerilla warfare and murder, leading to bitter internal strife within the people, and to a second, worse beating from the Babylonians. At the end of chapter 45 of Jeremiah, the Prophet is in exile in Egypt.

One clear lesson from this is not to fight for the sake of fighting. In many situations, fighting only makes things worse, and backing down is the wise thing to do. Once, in my youth, a somewhat older man got extremely, and rather mysteriously, angry at me in the gym. There was something about my lifting that he didn't like, it wasn't clear to me what. Backing down in front of a group of guys was unpleasant but, God be thanked, I had my wits about me enough to realize that if I let this develop into a fight, I would lose either way. I would lose right away if he beat me up, and once the police got involved I would lose if I beat him up. Backing down and going away was the thing to do (from this episode arises my preference for home gyms)

Another clear lesson from this is not to expect God to work miracles to rescue us from the consequences of our bad decisions. That doesn't mean that He will ever abandon us. The Old Testament makes it quite clear that the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon were not the end of Israel's story. In some ways, they were the beginning of the Jewish story. After we endure the earthly, temporal consequences of our bad decisions, we will still have a future, and the Lord will help us make that a good future. Still, sin, stupidity, and especially sinful stupidity, do have consequences in this world. We have no right to expect the Lord to deliver us from those consequences. We have the duty to accept those consequences in Faith, hoping faithfully that He will get us through them. We have the right to expect that the end of our story will be happy, as long as we repent from sin, learn from stupid mistakes, and commit ourselves to loving the Lord and doing His will.

A third lesson from this is that we really do have to fight to speak the truth that will help people. This may mean fighting people we love, but fighting them precisely because we love them. Jeremiah loved his king and people. Precisely because he loved them, he would not stop telling them that they were making a terrible mistake. All of us have had, or will have, the experience of seeing people we love make decisions that we know will mess up their lives. We probably shouldn't make every conversation we have with them about those bad decisions; but, if we love them, we will let them know, one way or another, that they are making some very bad choices. We will love them despite the bad choices. Loving them, we will help them get through the consequences of those bad choices. Loving them, however, we will also let them know that those choices are bad. Again, we probably shouldn't make those choices the topic of every conversation we have with them. Nagging is not an effective tool. Neither, however, is silence. If we truly love someone, and that person is really being self destructive, we do have to warn them, even if that means a fight. In rare circumstances that might even mean something physical, as when college friends of mine wrestled a hopelessly and stupidly drunk friend away from his car, and into their house. In much more frequent circumstances that means an unpleasant conversation. The person might resent what we say. If the problem is truly serious, however, and we truly love that person, resentment is just what we will have to risk. Love is worth a fight, even with the people we love.

In the 90s, it was quite common to hear people link Christianity with “Family Values” That isn’t altogether wrong, but it also isn’t altogether right. Christianity is not first and foremost about family. It is first and foremost about the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As Christians, as disciples of the Lord Jesus, our first duties are to acclaim Him as Lord, receive His Holy Spirit, and worship the Father through Him. Thank God that often our families support the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Even if they do not, however, our duty is clear. We are to acclaim Him as Lord, receive His Holy Spirit, and worship the Father through Him. Even if this separates us from our families, it joins us to God. This Sunday’s Gospel makes it clear that, important as family is, the Lordship of Jesus Christ is even more important. God comes even before family.

For some, this is a hard teaching to accept. I can’t blame them, but this is the Lord’s clear teaching. I have been thinking about this ever since junior high school days. A kid in religion class asked the very nice lady who taught our religion class about a friend of his who thought that he should become Catholic, but knew that his family would object violently. What should he do? The nice lady said that he shouldn’t upset his family. She was a nice lady and all that, but Jesus in today’s Gospel, and in a parallel passage in chapter 13 of Mark, says the opposite. He says that His true disciple is to follow where the Lord Jesus calls, whatever the disciples’ earthly family thinks or does. At that very time, I was having intense religious discussions with another kid in the neighborhood. I thought that he might be the coolest kid I knew, if he would only break from the weird sect his family belonged to. I knew that if he did, his family would be furious. I don’t think that I ever got close to persuading him to become Catholic, before his family moved away, but I did think seriously about how I - a junior high kid! - could support him, if he did decide to become Catholic. I am grateful to this day that the Lord put this Gospel passage into my head and heart. The nice religion teacher was simply wrong. Even a 12-14 year old can hear the call of the Lord Jesus. Once that call is heard, one must answer. The late Fr. Siu, who finished his priesthood and life in our diocese, was born in Hawaii into a Buddhist family. As a boy of that age he would sneak out of the house and go to a Catholic Church. Eventually his family found out, and their reaction was not nearly as explosive as he feared it would be. Still, he put first things first. He loved his family, but had to follow Jesus, even if that made his family mad.

The parallel passages in Luke 12 and Matthew 13 both look back to chapter seven of Micah, where the prophet warns that sometimes “a man’s enemies are the men of his own house”. We must still love them, but those who try to get between us and Jesus Christ are, accidentally perhaps, our enemies. We have to be prepared to fight them, with the weapons of faith and hope, surely, but fight them nonetheless. We cannot give in when it comes to matters of Faith and Morals. A young man I know read his way into recognizing a call to the Catholic Church. He feared that his family might react poorly to that. On a cruise with his family, he asked the retired priest who was chaplain for that cruise what to do. The priest, no doubt an exquisitely nice man, told him not to upset his family. The young man knew the Bible well enough to be uncomfortable with that advice, and asked me what to do. I told him to read Micah 7, Matthew 13, and Luke 12, and then he would know clearly what to do. He obeyed the Lord’s call, and

became a Catholic (as it happens, his family didn't react nearly as badly as he feared they would)

All of this comes down to one word: Fortitude. Fortitude is one of the natural "cardinal", or hinge, virtues. Touched by the Holy Spirit, it becomes the supernaturally strong ability to persevere in true Faith and sound Morals despite all obstacles and attacks. Fortitude is what has enabled twenty centuries of Christian Martyrs to remain loyal to Christian Faith and Morals despite every form of persecution, even in the face of death itself. With Spiritual Fortitude we can sacrifice peace and quiet, and much more if needed, for the sake of a just cause. When the natural quality of Fortitude is touched by spiritual power, we can say with Psalm 118 (which the Church prays in the Liturgy of the Hours every Sunday, either at Morning or Mid Day Prayer) "The Lord is my strength and my song, He has become my salvation". When the natural quality of Fortitude is touched by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we can be assured of His promise in chapter 16 of John's Gospel, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world"