



by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

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Have you ever suffered for your faith? Has any harm come to you because you believe in Jesus? At this very moment, there are Christians being tortured and killed because they dared to admit that they are believers.

According to the book *Jesus Freaks: Stories of those who stood for Jesus*, there have been more Christian martyrs in modern times than there were in 100 C.E in the Roman Empire. Close to 150,000 Christians were martyred in 1998, and the book estimated that 164,000 would be martyred in 1999 (*Jesus Freaks*, by DC Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs, Albury Pub., Tulsa, Okla.: 1999). And now, 17 years later, the numbers of those who are dying for their faith have increased steadily. Their stories have the power to feed our faith and fire our zeal if we but listen and learn.

Jeremiah's story is told in today's first reading. Because he dared to speak an unpopular truth to a disinterested and hostile people, he was thrown into a cistern and left to die. In the second reading, the author of Hebrews tells of the martyrdom of Jesus and encourages readers to be steadfast in their struggle against sin. The Lucan Gospel presents Jesus as a revolutionary who has come to set the world ablaze and be a source of division.

Each of these readings assures us that faith is a fight for truth, for justice, for mercy and for obedience to God. This fight was gallantly fought by Ivan Moiseyev, an 18-year-old Russian who in 1972 was beaten and then drowned because he refused to be silent about God. This fight was fought by 16th-century villagers in Flanders who were drowned, hanged, torn in pieces or burned alive for reading the Bible. In 1999, Roy Pontoh, a 15-year-old Indonesian boy, was hacked to death for refusing to renounce Jesus. In the 1970s, Communist soldiers in Asia shot a 16-year-old girl in the head for refusing to spit on the Bible. During the Korean War, Communist officers killed a pastor and 27 members of his congregation by crushing them under a steamroller because they refused to deny Christ.

Almost every week, media reports include the horrors being perpetrated by self-acclaimed religious groups like Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, ISIS and the like. Just when it seems it can get no worse, it does. How do we cope? How do we survive? How can we help to repair and renew so much that seems broken and doomed?

As I pondered the sorry situation in our world, an odd memory came to me. There is a Po'boy bar and grill in our city of Hattiesburg, Miss. Cars passing by can see a very large painting on the outside wall of the restaurant. Depicted there in very bright and eye-catching colors is a pelican with its large beak wide open. In its mouth is a frog, which is being swallowed whole; the only thing visible are its legs, squirming and struggling to be free. The caption under the painting reads: "Never give up!" That frog has given me much to think about. Even though its situation is dire, it refuses to surrender without a fight.

Today, dire situations are commonplace in many parts of our world. Refugees are being refused, immigrants are turned away. The toll of human suffering is overwhelming in places like Syria, Yemen, Chad, Sudan, Egypt, Kenya, Turkey, Ethiopia, Somalia, India, Algeria, Libya, Afghanistan, Greece, France, Belgium ... to name only a handful. There are "pelicans" everywhere ready to gobble up helpless "frogs." But we, as believers, know for certain that goodness will never be overcome by evil. It may seem that evil has the upper hand at times, but it will not prevail. Therefore we hope, we pray, we give of our time, talent and treasure so that all God's people will know peace.

We also remember that we are not alone. The faithful who have gone before us and are united for all eternity in Jesus are a constantly renewable resource for those of us who still struggle. The Hebrews author describes these faithful as "so great a

cloud of witnesses.” Paul — who is now in glory with that great cloud of witnesses — once said, “For our present troubles are quite small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurably great glory. ... So we don’t look at the troubles ... rather, we look forward to what we have not yet seen. ... The joys to come will last forever” (2 Cor 4:17-18, New Living Translation). Never give up!

### **JEREMIAH 38:4-6, 8-10**

From the outset, readers of Jeremiah will recognize that he was, in all he did and all he said, God’s man. As Walter Brueggemann notes, Jeremiah was a man to whom God’s persistent, inescapable and overriding word had been delivered (“Portrait of the Prophet,” in *Interpreting the Prophets*, edited by James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier, Fortress Press, Philadelphia: 1987). His life consisted in coming to terms with that word, finding ways to articulate it to his contemporaries and living with the often hazardous consequences of that reality. Today’s first reading recounts one of those hazards that the prophet willingly, but not silently, endured.

Because of incidents similar to the one described in this excerpted text, Jeremiah has earned a lasting place in the English language. A “jeremiad” is defined in A.S. Hornby’s Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as “a long, sad and complaining recitation of troubles, misfortune.” This jeremiad is part of a longer section (37:1-38:28) of dialogue between the prophet and King Zedekiah. A weak and inconsistent leader, Zedekiah was the last of Judah’s kings, having been appointed as a vassal king subject to Babylonia. Easily manipulated, Zedekiah allowed himself to be pressured by some of the Palestinian nobles to revolt against their overlords. Jeremiah objected to the revolt and exhorted the king and all the people to pray and repent of their sins. They refused, and as a result, were forced to beat a hasty retreat and eventually surrender to their Babylonian conquerors.

At one point in the siege, the king asked Jeremiah to intercede with God on behalf of the people. In reply, Jeremiah said that Nebuchadnezzar would soon make short shift of the Judahites with nothing better than an army of wounded soldiers (Jer 37:10). Infuriated by the prophet’s lack of cooperation, the king handed him over to the nobles, who threw him into a cistern.

In recent decades, many of the ancient cisterns in the ancient Near Eastern world have been excavated. These underground chambers were used for storing water. During the rainy season, they would be filled so that sufficient water would be

available for the dry season. A cistern's location would be kept secret in order to deter foul play (theft, poisoning the water supply, etc.). Because cisterns were usually bottle-shaped, it was virtually impossible to escape from one. People could only gain access by lowering a rope. What was Jeremiah to do? Yet again, his mouth and his message brought him trouble.

Escape came to the prophet in the form of an Ethiopian eunuch. Ebed Melech, a courtier at the king's palace, went to Zedekiah and spoke to him on behalf of Jeremiah. The king relented and ordered that Jeremiah be set free. The prophet resumed his ministry, but for safety's sake, he remained in the quarters of the palace guard until the day Jerusalem fell. There he sadly witnessed the realization of every word he had spoken to his people on God's behalf.

## **HEBREWS 12:1-4**

Today's second reading, which concludes the long cavalcade of Old Testament heroes, is part of a longer section (11:1-12:29) in which the Hebrews author stresses the importance of faith and discipline in the life of the believer. Those heroes — Abraham, Isaac, the prophets, etc. — are presented as exemplary models of faith whose virtues Christians are to emulate. Believers are supported by a "great cloud of witnesses" (v. 1), a term borrowed from the Greek classics. The witnesses are portrayed here as the spectators at a racing track or athletic field. Not passive or disinterested, this "great cloud" is cheering on the competitors on the track in order that they may not lose heart. Because these witnesses survived the "contest" of life and emerged victorious, they are now assuring their descendants that they will know a similar glory.

Athletes who engaged in the ancient Olympic events submitted to a rigorous and extensive training program. They willingly freed themselves from every hindrance, even their clothing, so as to do their very best. Continuing with this metaphor, the author of Hebrews exhorts, "Let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us" (v. 1). Athletes are told to "keep their eyes on the prize"; the ancient author advises that we "keep our eyes fixed on Jesus" (v. 2). As our leader or pioneer (*archegos*), Jesus has gone before us, setting the pace as well as the course by his passion and death on the cross. Because of his endurance and fidelity, he now sits in glory at God's right hand. Through baptism, believers now run the same course as Jesus and share in his victory forever.

In the final verse of this text, readers are reminded that just as Jesus faced opposition for his efforts, so will they. In fact, the intended first-century recipients of this letter were already facing persecution from Roman as well as Jewish circles. However, the ancient author told them, “you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood” (v. 4). According to William Barclay, this statement stressed the essential costliness of Christian faith (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, U.K.: 1976). Our salvation cost the life of the Son of God. A heritage like that is not something a person can hand down tarnished. These verses make the demand that is made of every Christian: Show yourselves worthy of the sacrifice that has been made for you by Jesus and all the many martyrs who lived and died for him. The ancient author will continue this same theme for the next three Sundays.

### **LUKE 12:49-53**

Perhaps some homilists might be tempted to pass on this Gospel, with its hard statements, and choose a more attractive sacred text about peace, love and reward. Nevertheless, the divisiveness that Jesus’ words and works brought to bear on the world is an integral aspect of his message. As the climax of a section addressed specifically to his disciples (12:1-53), today’s Gospel represents a composite of three originally independent sayings, each dealing with the effect Jesus’ ministry and that of his disciples after him would have upon the world (vv. 49, 50, 51-53).

Some scholars have suggested that verses 49-50 are a glimpse into Jesus’ soul. By describing his mission in terms of fire and division, Jesus made it clear that there could be no neutrality regarding his words and works. He knew that the challenging character of his teaching would meet with growing opposition and hostility on the part of those who refused to accept the truth.

A familiar biblical symbol, fire was a frequent metaphor for God’s presence (Gen 15:19; Exod 3:2; 13:21-22; Jer 23:29) among the chosen people. Because of its destructive potential and its purifying qualities, fire was also a sign of God’s activity. The Day of the Lord had long been associated with the purging fire of God’s intervention (Zech 13:9; Isa 43:2; Psalm 66:12). In his desire (“how I wish”) to ignite this blaze, Jesus knew that he was to be the crucible whereby all of humankind would be judged, purified and refined.

Baptism, in this context, does not refer to the sacrament but rather to the ordeal Jesus would suffer at the hands of those who rejected him and his message. This image of being immersed or baptized in suffering may have been derived from one of the psalmists, who described his personal tragedy in similar terms. Psalm 124:3-5 reads, "When their fury was inflamed against us, then would the waters have overwhelmed us. The torrent would have swept over us ... over us would have swept the raging waters." Jesus' baptism by suffering was more like water-boarding than a peaceful dip in the Jordan. Despite the anguish, Jesus persevered and endured all they heaped upon him for our salvation.

Jesus' claim to be a source of division rather than of peace points to the crisis his very presence induced. Crisis, from the Greek *krisis*, means choice or challenge. By the radical nature of his person and his message, Jesus' presence among humankind necessarily demanded a choice. Are you for him or are you not? There is no abstention from this choice. Those who accepted him and believed would be naturally set at odds with those who rejected him and remained without faith. Simeon had proclaimed this at Jesus' presentation in the temple: "This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many" (Luke 2:24). To put it another way, in the person of Jesus, each human being is presented with an ultimatum; a choice for or against Jesus. The terms of this choice and its consequences are more binding than the blood ties that form and unite a family. How shall you choose?

## **Planning: 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

Today's second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews contains an intriguing sentence: "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith."

What is this "great cloud of witnesses"? The author of this letter is referring to Old Testament men and women of faith. He sees them as witnessing from heaven the lives and struggles of Christians in his time.

In our own time, we can recognize an even greater cloud of witnesses, including all the Christian saints, canonized and non-canonized, who have gone before us in the history of our faith.

One of the major changes in the liturgical calendar after Vatican II was the restoration of the Sunday as the primary feast. Before the council, many Sunday celebrations were replaced with feasts of various saints. That obscured the liturgical seasons, so the reformed calendar limited such replacements to major feasts of Christ and Mary and a few others. One disadvantage of this reform, however, is that many Catholics who do not gather for daily Mass have little awareness of the many saints in our tradition.

Another dimension of this appears in art and architecture. Most churches now are not filled with multiple statues and images of the saints. In the past, many Catholics spent their time at Mass praying to the saints rather than participating in the liturgy itself. So the architectural focus on the altar and pulpit is a healthy change, but again, it diminishes parishioners' awareness of the saints and their role as models of the Christian life and intercessors in heaven.

What could you do in your parish to foster more awareness of the saints? Are there ways you can help the assembly to realize that they are worshiping in the midst of that cloud of witnesses? How can you teach them that sharing in the liturgy transcends the limits of both space and time? As we are united in worship with believers around the world, so we are also united with believers from centuries past. This is what we mean by the communion of saints, but I wonder how many Catholics have a vital sense of that communion.

Could you put an item in the bulletin each week about a saint whose feast or memorial occurs that week? If you have images of the saints available, could they be placed in the gathering space when their feast nears? If your parish is named for a saint, how do you celebrate your annual patronal feast? Could you place some images of saints around the back or sides of the worship space, reminding worshipers of the great cloud that surrounds them without detracting from the proper focus on the liturgy itself?

## **Prayers: 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

## **Introduction**

Many of us have experienced conflict around our faith or religious beliefs. We haven't paid the price of discipleship in blood, as many have done and still do today. But how do our conflicts reflect what Jesus told us to expect? Are our experiences merely uncomfortable or inconvenient? Do they reflect the seriousness of our commitment to the Gospel? It's jarring to remember that discipleship can disturb our peace and divide us from one another.

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you came to set the world on fire: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you came with a message that divides us: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be ready for conflict: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Aware that living the Gospel can be a dangerous thing, we pray for our fellow Christians, as well as for all people loved by God.

**Minister** For the church: that it may be an ongoing support for persecuted and challenged Christians ... we pray,

- For Christians living in danger throughout the world, especially where persecutions are rampant ... we pray,
- For those places in the world torn apart because of religious differences ... we pray,
- For families torn apart by religious belief or commitment ... we pray,
- For all who suffer for their faith, regardless of their faith tradition; and for those who use religion to persecute others ... we pray,
- For young people who are learning what it means to follow Christ ... we pray,
- For the ability to resist arrogance or a sense of superiority in following Christ ... we pray,
- For those in too much pain to focus on discipleship ... we pray,
- For those who are suffering from the summer heat; for the sick and dying; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray.



**Presider** God our protector, stand with us as we commit to living as faithful followers of your Son, Jesus. Help us to love and respect those who do not understand or value our choices, and strengthen us when we waver. We pray in the name of Jesus, who called us to baptism and discipleship. Amen.

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