

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Ps 40 (39); Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

Luke 12:49 [Jesus said:] “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

It has long been recognised that this passage is both disconcerting and difficult. The contrast with the usual picture of Jesus as messiah and bearer of peace most likely means that the sentiments go back, in some form, to Jesus himself. In any case, it was almost always the false prophets in the Bible who proffered peace. As the reading stands, it may also reflect the experience of the early church.

KIND OF WRITING

It is a series of sayings or *logia*. The link with the preceding material probably comes from the verb “to come” (12:37-40, 43-44). The first two verses are in parallel, taking the thought forward. V. 51 opens a polemical dialogue, which unfolds in apocalyptic-type illustrations, continuing through to v. 59.



For our reading, v. 49 is unique to Luke but not Lucan in style. V. 50 seems to echo v. 49, but with a shift to the destiny of Jesus himself.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Woe is me! For I have become like one who, after the summer fruit has been gathered, after the vintage has been gleaned, finds no cluster to eat; there is no first-ripe fig for which I hunger. The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets. Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of their sentinels, of their punishment, has come; now their confusion is at hand. Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; *for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.* But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. (Micah 7:1-7)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Contrasts with Luke

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!” (Luke 2:14)

Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. (Luke 10:5-6)

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” (Luke 19:38)

Thought for the day

The famous reflection of *Teilhard de Chardin* suggests itself: *The day will come when, after harnessing the ether, the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.*

The uncertainties of today are evident, political, economic and environmental. What can we as people of faith contribute? Again in the words of Teilhard, “there is something wonderful afoot in the universe.” The eyes of faith see the deeper pattern.

Prayer

God of the cosmos, you hold everything in being. God of love, you love the human race. God of our hearts, helps us to see your handiwork not only in the universe, but in the everyday events of our lives. Amen.

Parallels with Luke

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:34-35)

Parallels with the other Synoptics

But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?” (Mark 10:38) *Note: Matthew omits this phrase, while Luke omits the entire episode.*

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. (Matthew 10:34-36)

Parallel with the Gospel of Thomas

Jesus said, “I have cast fire upon the

world, and look, I'm guarding it until it blazes." (GThom 10)

ST PAUL

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master-builder I laid a foundation, but someone else builds on it. And each one must be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than what is being laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, each builder's work will be plainly seen, for the Day will make it clear, because it will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test what kind of work each has done. If what someone has built survives, he will receive a reward. If someone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1Corinthians 3:10-15 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 49 "The coming one" is a messianic designation, associated with the end times. Fire coming down can be for judgment: see Gen 19:24 and 2 Kgs 1:10-24. There may even be an echo of Jesus' mentor, John the Baptist: "*Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*" (Luke 3:9) Luke does not neglect the seriousness of the final judgment (17:31-35; 18:7; 21:25-28).

Fire can also purify, and is thus a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It all depends on the attitude of the listener. Although the sentence may well go back to Jesus, neither Mark nor Matthew makes use of it. The last phrase is a rare window into the intensity of the desire of the historical Jesus to fulfil his calling as Messiah.

Verse 50 In Mark's version of this sentence, there is a double image, baptism and cup, perhaps hinting at later sacramental access to salvation. On Jesus' lips, the phrase does not reflect on his own baptism by John or on the later Christian practice of baptism. The literal meaning of word is immersion and, in this context, it is a metaphor for test or trial, engulfing the whole person. In the context of Luke, placed against v. 49, the metaphor points to the ministry of Jesus, prophet and martyr, whose destiny brings about the end of time. Thus in v. 49 we hear the desire of Jesus and in v. 50 his apprehensions.

"What stress I am under": the verb used —*sunechō*—is found commonly in Luke-Acts (Luke 4:38; 8:37, 45; 12:50; 19:43;

22:63; Acts 7:57; 18:5; 28:8). It's basic meaning is to hold together, to grip, to press close.

The only exact parallel use is to be found in Nehemiah, in the Greek OT:

One day when I went into the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah son of Mehetabel, who was confined (*sunechōmenos*) to his house... (Nehemiah 6:10)

It is probably too much to see here a reference to Gethsemane, much less to the cross. Fitzmyer suggests "how hard pressed I am."

Verse 51 In general, Jesus draws back from the more lurid apocalyptic scenarios, so it is all the more interesting to see this direct engagement. Notice that Luke seems to have changed the wording, from sword to divisions. This fits better with what follows and underlines the aspect of personal choice and responsibility.

Verses 52-53 In Jewish apocalyptic imagination, the end times would be marked by many woes, including the collapse of familial and social relationships. The saying forms part of Jesus' project of the restoration of Israel. The emerging Israel will no longer be based on blood or inherited privilege or social custom, but on faith. It is nothing less than a revolutionary vision, marking a break with my and our past. Naturally, such a revolution will trigger opposition, as Jesus sees with clear-sighted realism. Jesus himself left his family, he did not marry and have children and he was rejected by his own. As in vv. 49 and 50, the messiah does not demand anything that he himself had not experienced. Cf. *Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.* (Luke 14:25-27)

The five pairs—literally a handful—hammer home the shock of choice and resultant division. "From now on" (Lukan redaction) means that such breakdown is a consequence of Jesus' mission. It is not that Jesus demands division but rather that the proclamation leaves no one neutral. It is the lack of acceptance of the Good News, on account of evil hearts, which triggers disharmony.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The commitment of Jesus to his mission is shown in his desire to undergo the

baptism that awaits him. Have there been times when there was something you greatly hoped for, even though you knew there would be a baptism of fire along the way? What was it like for you to undergo such a baptism of fire and then arrive at what you desired?

2. Jesus recognised that the message he proclaimed would meet with a mixed reception. This did not hold him back from proclaiming the Reign of God. When have you seen this kind of courage in yourself, or in others?

3. Jesus challenged those listening to him to commit themselves to discipleship, despite opposition from those close to them, even family members. When have you found that being true to yourself and to your beliefs required such courage? What was it like for you when you were able to follow that courageous road?

PRAYER

To set the earth ablaze, O God, your Son submitted to a baptism unto death, and from his cup of suffering you call the Church to drink.

Keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and give us strength in time of trial to run the race that lies before us. Amen.

Teilhard de Chardin: The Offering

Since once again, Lord — though this time not in the forests of the Aisne but in the steppes of Asia — I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labours and sufferings of the world.

Over there, on the horizon, the sun has just touched with light the outermost fringe of the eastern sky. Once again, beneath this moving sheet of fire, the living surface of the earth wakes and trembles, and once again begins its fearful travail. I will place on my paten, O God, the harvest to be won by this renewal of labour. Into my chalice I shall pour all the sap which is to be pressed out this day from the earth's fruits.

My paten and my chalice are the depths of a soul laid widely open to all the forces which in a moment will rise up from every corner of the earth and converge upon the Spirit. Grant me the remembrance and the mystic presence of all those whom the light is now awakening to the new day.

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith

Heb 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Heb 12:3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading from Hebrews offers us today one of the most appealing passages in the whole letter. It takes us directly to the heart of the Christian mystery, Jesus himself, and spells out the consequences for us.

KIND OF WRITING

The writer has just completed the great chapter 11, parading the great heroes of the faith before our eyes. In chapter 12, he starts the application, as we move from “since we are surrounded” to “let us lay aside.” Technically, we are moving from exposition to exhortation.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* shows the following sequence (A. Vanhoye SJ):

1:1-4	Introduction
1:5-14	Exposition
2:1-4	Exhortation
2:5-5:10	Exposition
5:11-6:20	Exhortation
7:1-10:18	Exposition
10:19-39	Exhortation
11:1-40	Exposition
12:1-13	Exhortation
12:14-13:19	Exhortation
13:20-25	Conclusion

Our reading comes from the final, great exhortation of Hebrews 12-13.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Part of the context at the time seems to have been the risk of complacency—perhaps not such a risk for us today as in

the recent past. Nowadays, if you’re still involved in the Christian project you are usually not complacent. On the contrary, we tend to be a bit worked up about it all. Nevertheless, a word of encouragement is always welcome.

RELATED PASSAGES

For you need endurance (*upomonē*) in order to do God’s will and so receive what is promised. (Hebrews 10:36 NET)

For when he put all things under his control, he left nothing outside of his control. At present we do not yet see all things under his control, but we see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by God’s grace he would experience death on behalf of everyone. For it was fitting for him, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the *pioneer* of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Hebrews 2:8b-10 NET)

This was a symbol for the time then present, when gifts and sacrifices were offered that could not *perfect* the conscience of the worshiper. They served only for matters of food and drink and various washings; they are external regulations imposed until the new order came. (Hebrews 9:9-10 NET)

After God spoke long ago in various portions and in various ways to our ancestors through the prophets, in these last days he has spoken to us in a son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he created the world. The Son is the radiance of his glory and the representation of his essence, and he sustains all things by his powerful word, and so when he had accomplished cleansing for sins, *he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*. Thus he became so far better than the angels as he has inherited a name superior to theirs. (Hebrews 1:1-4 NET)

My child, do not despise discipline from the LORD, and do not loathe his rebuke. For the LORD disciplines those he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights. (Proverbs 3:11-12 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Building on the affirmation of the heroes in Hebrews 11, the writer exhorts in an already familiar pattern: 4:14-16; 10:19-25; 13:12-13. Cloud is a regular image for a numberless gathering. The cultural echo is already that of athletics, as we observe these heroes, so to speak, as in a contest or stadium. Like them, we are to forego whatever hinders our participation in the great contest of life, which is the faith. As spiritual athletes, we have to lose that spiritual flab—sin—which impedes our progress. The range of meanings for the sin that “clings so closely” is instructive: easily ensnaring, obstructing, constricting. Perseverance is the great Christian virtue of steadfastness (*upomonē*)—found 32 times in the NT. Cf. Hebrews 13:6 above.

Verse 2 “Looking to” is interesting. It means lit. to look *away from* any distraction, and so to look at intently. Cf. *They vindicated their nation, looking to God and enduring torture even to death*. (4Maccabees 17:10 NRSV / Greek OT).

For “pioneer” and “made perfect”, see Heb 28b-10, 9:9-10. The Greek says pioneer and perfecter of *the* faith (as such, so to speak).

The summary of Jesus’ destiny is traditional (and chiasitic):

- A the joy that was set before him
- B endured the cross
- B* disregarding its the shame
- A* has taken his seat at the right hand

The form and language are traditional. Cf. Hebrew 1:1-4 above.

Verses 3-4 “Consider” is really a synonym for looking intently at in v. 2. Jesus was tested even more, to the point of death, whereas the readers have not reached that extreme. *Consequently*, they should take courage. Growing weary is a risk for athletes, of course. Vv. 4-11 are evidently a Midrash (ruminating reflection) on Prov 3:11-12 (see above).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What are the trials of faith which really test me?
2. What “keeps me going” as a believer?

PRAYER

Faithful God, stay with us on the journey towards Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

This man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm

Jer 38:1 *Now Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people, 2 Thus says the Lord, Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out to the Chaldeans shall live; they shall have their lives as a prize of war, and live. 3 Thus says the Lord, This city shall surely be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon and be taken.*

Jer 38:4 Then the officials said to the king, “This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm.” 5 King Zedekiah said, “Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you.” 6 So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king’s son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

Jer 38:7 *Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch in the king’s house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin Gate, 8 so Ebed-melech left the king’s house and spoke to the king, 9 “My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city.” 10 Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, “Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies.”*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Jesus’ prophetic ministry triggered opposition of the kind presented forcefully and paradoxically in today’s Gospel. Scholars of different stripes would be in agreement that the Jesus of history saw himself as a prophet and was recognised as such. Any familiarity with the Hebrew Bible would suggest that the genuine prophets also encountered tremendous opposition. The great prophetic figures (Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) are never far from the minds of the evangelists, as they portray the prophetic identity of Jesus.

The omission of the first few verses is no doubt for brevity but they do help make sense of the charge.

KIND OF WRITING

As the story unfolds, we hear of the siege of Jerusalem, which led to the emigration of some Judeans, who make their way to Egypt. In this part of the book, the destinies of Jeremiah and Zedekiah are intertwined in the last days of Jerusalem. The king appeals to the prophet for counsel but cannot accept the word of the prophet. In a context of diminishing authority, some officials decide to take Jeremiah out of the equation, and so he ends up in a cistern. Cisterns could be huge.

An Ethiopian courtier, Ebed-Melech (= the king’s servant), comes to the rescue and a rather tired sounding Zedekiah finally reacts.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Jeremiah lived and wrote before and during the great Exile in Babylon. The book that has come down to us is broadly in two large halves:

- Part I: Destruction and disaster
- Part II: Restoration and hope.

Our reading comes from Part II of the book, which can be outlined thus:

- 26 Hints of hope
- 27-29 Theologies of hope
- 30-34 The book of hope;
- 36-45 Traces of hope;
- 46-51 Hope for the refugees;
- 52 Restoration as mark of hope

Our reading is from the section above entitled “Traces of hope.”

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

See Jeremiah 37:11-16

Benjamin Gate

Then Pashhur struck the prophet Jeremiah, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper *Benjamin Gate* of the house of the Lord. (Jeremiah 20:2)

When he reached the *Benjamin Gate*, a sentinel there named Irijah son of Shelemiah son of Hananiah arrested the prophet Jeremiah saying, “You are deserting to the Chaldeans.” (Jeremiah 37:13)

Jeremiah must have been wearily familiar with the Benjamin Gate!

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 4 In an increasingly desperate situation, some officials took to themselves authority to silence the truth-telling but politically awkward Jeremiah. The charge was serious: treason in war. Jeremiah did indeed encourage mass desertion.

Verse 5 The king admitted his impotence.

Verse 6 The detail is impressive, as poor Jeremiah sinks into the mud. Why delay the execution? It may well be that they intended him to drown.

Verse 7 Ebed-melech was perhaps a eunuch or court administrator. He supported Jeremiah, who later promised him he would survive the siege and destruction.

Verse 8 The king was conveniently near the place of incarceration. He may well be have been “sitting in the gate” i.e. exercising his function as judge.

Verse 9 No water in the well and no bread in the city: total disaster. Jeremiah was not going to drown but he could starve to death. Being “rescued” is not an obvious benefit.

Verse 10 A rather weary-sounding king, but somehow managing to do what is right nevertheless.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Did you ever find yourself having to say something unpopular which provoked a negative reaction? Did your courage hold?
2. Even in very difficult situations, good people emerge and we can be surprised. Have you had the experience of a good Samaritan who came to your rescue?
3. Like Jeremiah, sometimes we are between a rock and a hard place—no water in the cistern, no bread in the city. What keeps you going?

PRAYER

Great and loving God, you have given the supreme example of Jesus, prophet, pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Help us to take courage from his example, as we face our different test and trials and to set us aside whatever hinders us. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Ps 40 (39); Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

READINGS 1 AND 3

The excerpt might be thought to fit better with the suffering of Jesus himself and perhaps this is so. However, the divided reaction to Jeremiah serves to underline the divisions which also illustrate the contrasting reactions to Jesus.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 40 (39) is perfect, especially the words, *He drew me from the deadly pit, from the miry clay.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

Good people who talk straight often trigger strong opposition. This happened frequently to Jeremiah, the great prophet. The context is the siege of Jerusalem and the prophet had just told people to run away and save their lives!

Second reading

Hebrews 12:1-4

“Life is difficult”—the opening words of that popular book, *The Road Less Travelled*. The life of faith, too, has its challenges, as we hear.

Gospel

Luke 12:49-53

We tend to link Christianity with “family values.” Here’s another angle, as Jesus disrupts family life, causing dissension.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 19 August

St John Eudes, priest

Judges 2:11-19

The book of Judges tells of the intermediate time between the entry into the Land and the setting up of a monarchy. Many, many times, it tells of the people falling into idolatrous practices with disastrous consequences.

Matthew 19:16-22

A failed calling is always tough to listen to. It does remind us that we become disciples not because *we* choose it but rather the *Lord* chooses us

Tuesday 20 August

St Bernard, abbot and doctor



Judges 6:11-24

In response to social chaos and religious idolatry, God appoints leaders for his people, called “judges.” Today we hear of the call of Gideon and of his encounter with God, a memorable tale.

Matthew 19:23-30

The question of Peter might seem strange, but riches were regarded as a blessing from God. How could a *gift from God* hinder us? Thus we see the values of the kingdom are quite “alternative.”

Wednesday 21 August

St Pius X, bishop of Rome

Judges 9:6-15

Our reading today is a justly famous parable from the Old Testament. Using the imagery of trees in a forest looking for a ruler, it warns against setting up a monarchy because only God should be the king over Israel. The shade of the thorn bush offers more than “pleasant coolness in the heat”! Monarchies, we are told, colonise and exploit and therefore be careful in wishing for one.

Matthew 20:1-16

This passage can surprise and even offend still. It is, of course, no basis for labour relations but a great basis for God-relations! Such a relief that we don’t have to merit it or earn it in any

way—all is grace.

Thursday 22 August

Our Lady, queen and mother

Judges 11:29-39

This “text of terror” is a dreadful warning against losing faith and making foolish oaths. It is not at all a moral story but rather an illustration of terrible consequences when the centre does not hold.

Matthew 22:1-14

To “get” this parable, it is vital to hear it on two levels. There is the level of the historical Jesus, using traditional festal and nuptial imagery for the kingdom. There is the level of church, looking back and what actually happened to Jesus, the messiah and prophet.

Friday 23 August

St Rose of Lima

Ruth 1:1, 3-6, 14-16, 22

The wonderful short novel which is the book Ruth begins in a sombre way, with three deaths and three widows. Ruth’s devotion to her mother-in-law is exemplary. (Not *really* suitable for weddings, however!!)

Matthew 22:34-40

Asked a penetrating question, Jesus as a good Jew gives two answers. The first is really the *Sh’ma Yisrael*, recited three times daily by observant Jews. The second great principle comes from a somewhat unlikely source, the book of Leviticus.

Saturday 24 August

St Bartholomew, apostle

Apocalypse 21:9-14

What will heaven be like? Using a rich array of metaphors—marriage, jewellery, a city, the twelve tribes and the Lamb of God—our reading offers a stunning, vibrant and inviting portrait.

John 1:45-51

In this Gospel, the spread of the Good News is a kind of wildfire, with one person drawing another in. Symbolically, the fig tree referred to knowledge of God and evil and hence to the Torah which gives us this knowledge.