

## **Synopsis: OT XX [C] Sunday (August 14) on Luke 12: 49-53 (L-16)**

Introduction: The central theme of today's readings is that we should courageously live out our religious convictions and principles in our lives, as Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus did theirs, even if doing so should result in our martyrdom and turn society upside down. If no one is ever offended by the quality of our commitment to Christ, then perhaps we are practicing "inoffensive Christianity."

Scripture lessons: Jeremiah, in our First Reading, is presented as experiencing the consequences of the burning word of God within him. Jeremiah's preaching divided the city and incited such opposition that people sought his death. He showed the courage of his prophetic conviction by telling the king that he had to surrender to the mighty army of Babylonian empire to save Israel. The result was that Jeremiah was thrown into a deep, muddy cistern to die for his "treason." Standing in this prophetic tradition, Paul, in the second reading, challenges the Judeo-Christians to stand firm in their faith in Jesus, ignoring the ostracism imposed on them by their own former Jewish community. Jesus, too, in today's Gospel, preaches the word of God which continues to divide families, a word which, he knew, would lead ultimately to his death. The fire Jesus brings is the fire of love and the fire of hope. The disruption, division and revolution Jesus and his true followers cause in society by the fire of sacrificial love and the fire of justice is necessary to re-set what's fractured, put right what's dislocated and cleanse what's infected. In other words, the curative pain caused by Jesus' ideas and ideals is necessary for the establishment of real *shalom* of God. Even though Jesus brings a sword and causes division, he is the bringer of true and lasting peace. In pursuing his mission, Jesus brings division because some follow him and others oppose him. We must make a decision to follow him or not, to share his "baptism" or not. This choice can result in division, even within families.

Life messages:# 1: Let us learn to appreciate the contemporary prophets in the Church: The Jesuit Cardinal Avery Dulles, writing about the role of prophecy in the modern Church communities in his book *Models of the Church*, remarks: “Christianity is not healthy unless there is room in it for prophetic protest against abuses of authority.” God continues to send such prophets to every parish community and it is the duty of the bishop, pastor and parish council to listen to the well-intended and constructive criticisms of such Jeremiahs.

# 2: We should have fire in our hearts: On the day of our Baptism, we received the light of Christ and were instructed to keep that torch burning brightly until the return of Christ Jesus. In addition, the Holy Spirit was sent into our hearts at Confirmation to help set us on fire. “*He who is on fire cannot sit on a chair.*” So, as Christians on fire, we have to inflame people to care, to serve, and to bless one another with all the gifts of Faith. We should allow that fire to burn off the impurities in us and to bring out the purity of the gold and silver within us.

OT XX [C] (August 14) Jer 38: 4-6, 8-10; Heb 12: 1-4; Lk 12: 49-53

Anecdote: 1: “Be God’s prophets and God’s microphones” (Oscar Romero). God sends His prophets to give the world His message in every century. Blessed Oscar Romero, Blessed Mother Teresa, Pope St. John Paul II, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dom Helder Camara, Maura Clark, Dorothy Kazel, Ita Ford, Jeanne Donovan, and Ella Baker were all twentieth century prophets who had the courage of their Christian convictions to follow Jesus and proclaim his undiluted message which *cast fire on earth* and caused healthy *division* in the society as today’s Gospel points out. In 1980, in the midst of a U.S.-funded genocidal war against the so-

called *leftist rebels* in El Salvador, Archbishop Blessed Oscar Romero who sided with the poor, exploited farm workers, declared: *"If they kill all your priests and the bishop too, each one of you must become God's microphone, each one of you must become a prophet. I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people."* Amid overarching violence, Romero wrote to President Jimmy Carter pleading with him to cease sending military aid to the brutal military regime because, he wrote, *"it is being used to repress my people."* The U.S. sent \$1.5 million in aid every day for 12 years. Archbishop Romero's letter went unheeded. Two months later, he was assassinated. Ending a long homily addressed to the pro-government land owners and peasants and the military and broadcast throughout the country, his voice rose to breaking, *"Brothers, you are from the same people; you kill your fellow peasants . . . . No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is contrary to the will of God."* There was thunderous applause; he was inviting the army to mutiny. Then his voice burst out, *"In the name of God then, in the name of this suffering people I ask you, I beg you, I command you in the name of God: stop the repression."* Oscar Romero gave his last homily on March 24, 1980, moments before a sharpshooter felled him at the altar of a hospital chapel. Reflecting on the day's Scripture, he had said, *"One must not love oneself so much, as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and those that fend off danger will lose their lives."* In an interview as he was flying to Brazil in May, 2007 Pope Benedict told the reporters, "Romero as a person merits beatification." In July 2007, the new Salvadoran conservative government said it would formally request the Vatican to beatify Romero although it will not accept responsibility for his slaying. Pope Francis beatified the martyred Archbishop Romero on May 23, 2015. Today's readings remind us that the Church needs prophets like Romero and cautions contemporary prophets that their course will not be easy. (<http://salt.claretianpubs.org/romero/romero.html>).

# 2: Apathetic Attitude: In 1993, the total attendance at worship services in the United States came to 5.6 billion. The total attendance for all pro-

basketball, baseball and football games combined was only 103 million, less than 2 percent of the number who attended worship ["To Verify: Statistics for Christian Communicators," *Leadership* 15 (Fall 1994), 50).] We complain about a shrinking Church membership when the numbers actually point to a shrinking sense of excitement and exuberance for Christ's sake. In the name of sports, those 103 million get stadiums built, get team franchises moved, give local economies a boost and get whole regions of the country stand-up-and-shout excited. In the name of Christ, how much more could 5.6 billion accomplish in this country in the world if they were as "on fire" as the sports fans?

# 3: Courage to confront: In the 1920s, an English adventurer named Mallory led an expedition to conquer Mount Everest. His first, second and even his third attempt with an experienced team met with failure. Upon his return to England, the few who had survived held a banquet to salute Mallory and those who had perished. As he stood up to speak he looked around he saw picture frames of himself and those who had died. Then he turned his back on the crowd and faced a large picture of Mount Everest looming large like an unbeatable giant. With tears streaming down his face, he spoke to the mountain on behalf of his dead friends. "I speak to you Mt. Everest, in the name of all brave men living, and those yet unborn. Mt. Everest, you defeated us once, you defeated us twice; you defeated us three times. But Mt. Everest, we shall someday defeat you, because you can't get any bigger, but we can." Today's Scripture challenges us to confront the world with prophetic courage of our Christian convictions (John Rose in *John's Sunday Homilies*).

Introduction: The central theme of today's readings is that we should courageously live out our religious convictions and principles in our lives, as Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus did theirs, even if doing so should result in our martyrdom and turn society upside down. If no one is ever offended by the quality of our commitment to Christ, that commitment may not be authentic, and if our individual and communal living of the Good News casts no fire and causes no division, then perhaps we are practicing "inoffensive Christianity." Jeremiah, in our First Reading, is

presented as experiencing the consequences of the burning word of God within him. Jeremiah's preaching divided the city and incited such opposition that people sought his death. He showed the courage of his prophetic conviction by telling King Zedekiah that the Lord God said he had to surrender to the mighty army of Babylonian empire to save Israel. The result was that Jeremiah was thrown into a deep, muddy cistern to die for his "treason." Standing in this prophetic tradition, Paul, in the second reading, challenges the Judeo-Christians to stand firm in their Faith in Jesus, ignoring the ostracism imposed on them by their own former Jewish community. Jesus, too, in today's Gospel, preaches the word of God which continues to divide families, a word which, he knew, would ultimately lead to his death. The fire Jesus came to bring is the fire of love and the fire of hope. The disruption, division and revolution Jesus and his true followers cause in society by the fire of sacrificial love and the fire of justice is necessary to re-set what's fractured, put right what's dislocated, and cleanse what's infected. In other words, the curative pain caused by Jesus' ideas and ideals is necessary for the establishment of real *shalom* of God. Even though Jesus brings a sword and causes division, he is the bringer of true and lasting peace. In pursuing his mission, Jesus brings division because some follow him and others oppose him. We must make a decision to follow him or not, to share his "baptism" or not. This choice can result in division, even within families.

**First reading, Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10**: The first reading warms us up to hear today's Gospel, where Jesus speaks with prophetic bluntness about how his mission will divide those who accept him from those who don't. The prophet Jeremiah lived from about 650 B.C. to perhaps 580 B.C. It was during this period that Babylon, becoming the supreme power in Mesopotamia, demanded tribute from all the smaller kingdoms, including Judah. While the princes urged King Zedekiah, to seek military help from Egypt against Babylon, the Lord God, through His prophet Jeremiah, told them to pay the tribute to avoid a greater evil. Jeremiah had been predicting the impending destruction of Jerusalem as a judgment from YHWH because most of the kings of Judah had fallen

further and further away from God and from their religion and because they had entered into unholy political alignment with neighboring countries, instead of trusting in their God. The prophet's death sentence described in the first reading occurred during the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians about 587 B.C. Since the city was surrounded by the Babylonian army, the Lord God, through Jeremiah, had told the king and the military leaders to surrender and pay tribute to the Babylonians. That way the king might save his life and the lives of his people. But Jeremiah sounded unpatriotic and even seditious, defeatist and treasonable to the military leaders who complained to King Zedekiah. The king turned Jeremiah over to them, and they put him into a dry cistern with fairly deep mud at the bottom to die. Jeremiah was saved by the sympathy of an Ethiopian courtier named Ebed-melech who evidently held a position of considerable authority at the royal court. Since the king did not listen to God's counsel given by His prophet, Babylon captured and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 and took all the able-bodied citizens to Babylon as prisoners. The cost of following God's word, experienced by Jeremiah as a life so marked by suffering and opposition that he cursed the day he was born (20:14), points to the division Jesus brings (today's Gospel).

**Second Reading, [Hebrews 12:1-4](#):** Paul wrote this letter to the Judeo-Christians who had been rejected by their fellow Jews, kicked out of synagogues and cut off from family and old friends. Separated from the comforting rituals and institutions they had known, these folks needed their faith bolstered. Hence, Paul praised a long list of faithful Jews from the past, particularly Abraham, detailing some of the difficulties they had faced. Those heroic figures are the great "cloud of witnesses" mentioned in today's passage. The author wanted his Judeo-Christians (the Hebrews), to think of themselves as athletes in a race in a stadium, where their ancestors in the Faith would be spectators, surrounding them and cheering them on because their descendants were now running the same race they had run in their day. These ancestors were "witnesses" to the power of Faith to endure against every temptation to apostasy. Paul asked the Hebrew Christians to run the race, *keeping*

*their eyes fixed on Jesus the “leader and perfecter of our faith.”* In his earthly life, Jesus was the pioneer because he initiated the way of Faith—the way through suffering to glory (v. 2)—and its perfecter because he completed his “course,” thus enabling believers to run the same race, through suffering to glory. We, too, are called to do our best until our great run for the Faith is crowned with victory.

Exegesis: Today’s Gospel passage consists of two sections: in the first section (vv 49-50), Jesus speaks of his Divine destiny to endure suffering, and in the second section (vv 51-53), he prophesies the breakup of families resulting from his message. Jesus explains his Divine destiny by highlighting his role of “*setting the earth on fire*” and being “*baptized*” in the waters of suffering. The images of fire and baptism refer to his mission, both in terms of the cost that it will exact from him and the decision it will require of people.

**“I have cometo 'set the earth on fire.'”** In the Bible, fire is sometimes symbolic of purification (for example, Nm 31:23; Ez 22:19-22), and, more often, is associated with God’s judgment (for example, Jdt 16:17; Is 66:16; Am 7:4; 2 Pt 3:7). The image of fire is also used to symbolize God's glory (Ez 1:4, 13), His protective presence (2 Kgs 6:17), His holiness (Dt 4:24), His righteous judgment (Zec 13:9), and His wrath against sin (Is 66:15-16). The image of fire is also used of the Holy Spirit (Mt 3:11 and Acts 2:3). Fire has many characteristics: it warms, purifies, refines, transforms, and burns. As a purifying force, fire burns up what is useless and refines what is impure besides giving warmth and energy. Elijah brought the fire of judgment on the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:36-40) and the soldiers of King Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:10-14). John the Baptist promises that Jesus “*will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*”(Matt 3: 11), and that promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritans who rejected Jesus, but Jesus would not permit it (Lk 9:54). We are also reminded of the prophet's words, “*For he is like a refiner's fire...*” (Mal 3:2). The fire burns hot, removing impurities and leaving only that which is desirable. These meanings suggest that the fire which Jesus

brings will consume or purify the world. However, it is also possible that he means that his baptism will be a baptism of fire. In the Aramaic language the word translated as “earth” can also mean “earth-oven,” the common stove in Mediterranean villages, heated by burning dried and salted camel-dung patties. The salt in the dried camel dung acted as a catalyst keeping fire burning for a long time. In that sense, Jesus acts as a catalyst in his believers’ life

**“I must be baptized with a baptism.”** The cup and baptism are metaphors for Jesus’ suffering and death when Jesus asks James and John, “*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?*” What Jesus means by his statement is “I have a terrible experience through which I must pass, and life is full of tension until I pass through it and emerge triumphantly from it.” Our Baptism is an immersion in Christ’s death in which we die to sin and are reborn to the new life of grace: “*We were indeed buried with him through Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life*”(Romans 6:4). In the same way, our Eucharistic celebration is a recollection of Jesus’ baptism (immersion) in suffering, death and the anguish these caused him, not simply a celebration of the community with the risen Christ and with other believers.

**“I have come to establish division on earth, not peace.”**As Jesus walked the road to Jerusalem, the disciples had to decide whether to go with him or not. To be with or against Jesus is a decision which has the effect of judgment and division. Since Luke emphasizes peace as the gift that Jesus brings (1:79; 2:14; 19:38), we are shocked when Jesus declares that he has come not to bring peace on earth but division, splitting even families apart. Jesus’ teaching caused division in families, in communities and in the Church. For the Palestinian Jews of the first century, a person's place in the family conferred personal identity,

protection, a support system, and a place in the community. To separate oneself from one's family or clan was, literally, a matter of life and death. But Christianity tore families in two, because a follower of Christ had to decide whether he loved better his kith and kin or Christ. In Christianity, the loyalty to Christ has to take precedence over the dearest loyalties of this earth. Belief in Jesus and commitment to him cause fires of arguments to erupt between believers and non-believers in the same family or community, resulting in the division of families and conflict in society. Standing up for what is right, working for justice and truth are higher aims than unity, and working for those aims will sometimes cause division. Hence, Christians today may cause division and rouse opposition because they share through their Baptism the prophetic charism of speaking God's word, no matter how unpopular, and of giving a voice to those who have no one to speak for them. Let us remember that Jesus' sense of justice brought him into conflict with those who exploited the weak and the poor. His integrity invited confrontation with the dishonest and hypocritical leaders, and his love for the poor, for sinners and for the outcast alienated him from the narrow-minded and self-righteous. C. S. Lewis once said that the Gospel was concerned to create "new people" not just "nice people."

Life messages: # 1: Let us learn to appreciate the contemporary prophets in the Church: The Jesuit Cardinal Avery Dulles, writing about the role of prophecy in the modern Church communities in his book *Models of the Church*, remarks: "Christianity is not healthy unless there is room in it for prophetic protest against abuses of authority." God continues to send such prophets to every parish community and it is the duty of the bishop, pastor and parish council to listen to the well-intended and constructive criticisms of such Jeremiahs. The words of the late Archbishop HelderCamara, the champion of Brazil's poor, serves as a prophetic warning, to all members of the Church: "*When I give bread to the poor they call me a Saint. But when I ask why the poor have no bread, they call me Communist.*"

# 2: We should have fire in our hearts: On the day of our Baptism, we received the light of Christ and were instructed to keep that torch burning brightly until the return of Christ Jesus. Further, the Holy Spirit was sent into our hearts at Confirmation to help set us on fire. The old proverb should be applicable to all baptized and confirmed Christians: “He /She who is on fire cannot sit on a chair.” Our Lord Jesus continues to cast fire on the earth, the fire of the Spirit, through the ministry of Word and Sacraments. As Christians, we should have fire to inflame people to care, to serve, and to bless each other with all the gifts of Faith. We should work with the Holy Spirit to allow that fire to burn off the impurities in us and to bring out the purity of the gold and silver within us. We need Divine fire to inflame our hearts with the love of God and love for His children. We Christians should blaze with the same fire with which Jesus wished his disciples to burn: “*I came to cast fire upon earth, and would that it were already kindled*” (Luke 12: 49). Hence, let us remember the old saying, “He/She who is on fire cannot sit on a chair,” and let us carry the fire of the Holy Spirit wherever we go. The scientist-cum-theologian Teilhard de Chardin said: “Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity we shall harness the energies of love. Then for the second time in the history of the world man will have discovered fire.” “An 'adult' faith is not a Faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty (“*dictatorship of relativism*”); a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth” (Benedict XVI, April 18, 2005). Such a Faith will enable the fire of the Holy Spirit to burn in us and give us the courage of our Christian convictions.**L/16**

*(Prepared by Fr. Tony Kadavil (stjohngrandbay.org) and published by  
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