

20th Sunday of the Year, Year C

Today's readings are about life. They are about blades of grass forcing their way through concrete to make contact with the sun. They are about spring flowers bursting through the ice of winter, to display their beauty and propagate life. They are about people like Jeremiah thrown into a disused well and sinking in the mire, crying out to God in their distress and being hauled back to safety. The readings are about life and they are about putting our trust in God from whom our life comes. We are part of nature, and we know that we need to break through to communion with God if we are to experience the life for which we long.

Today's Responsorial Psalm pours from the heart of a person who has just been rescued from a terrible situation by God.

'I waited, I waited for the Lord and he stooped down to me; he heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God ...
As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord thinks me.
You are my help and my deliverer; you are my God, do not delay'(Psalm 40:1-3,17).

Another verse from the same psalm reads:

'There is no escape from the evils which overwhelm me;
my sins have caught up with me.
I cannot see and my heart fails me'(Psalm 40:12).

At different stages of our lives our problems differ. Some of us are like trees that have been protected from the ravages of the wild animals, the gale force winds and those who wield an axe. Thanks to the grace of God and the love of many people, as well as the habits of discipline adhered to in our youth, the tree is pretty straight and strong and our life-experience makes it hard for us to be twisted out of shape. If that is how you are, thank God and thank your parents and those who have loved you and go on giving shade and producing flower and fruit, keeping our landscape beautiful and clean. However, some of us are like old bones that have been broken and have set badly. Life has to break us again if we are ever to be set right. This can be hard and very painful.

The problems facing the young are very different. Their bones have not set yet. The tree is still growing. They do not have the problems that come with hardening, but neither do they have the experience and maturity that can protect them against breaking or being twisted out of shape or so harmed that they cannot bear fruit. As the time of childhood is more and more restricted, the young are more and more exposed before they have formed. This avoids the danger of the kinds of restrictions on growth that happen from overdone control, but it has real and obvious dangers.

So, whatever our age and life-experience, we can all identify in some way with Jeremiah in today's readings. We reach for the light, we want to break through into life, we don't want to be trapped or bogged down. If we are to break through to a freedom in which we can receive and give love, we need two things. We need discipline. A small tree needs protecting. A wind-break,

perhaps even a stake. If our heart is going to learn to love we cannot afford to let it give in to any passing whim or fleeting desire. If our mind is ever going to learn to think well we will have to stop opening it to all the sights and sounds in the ether and learn to discipline ourselves to acquire habits of thinking that will liberate us by training and refining our capacity to create what is truly worthwhile. We will have to learn to be discerning. Isn't this what education is about?

We need discipline, but we need something else. If we find ourselves with a serious medical condition we will need discipline to continue certain exercises or to avoid certain foods and be regular in taking medicine. We can try to cure ourselves and be very disciplined in carrying out our own resolutions, but if we have an excellent specialist whom we trust, we would do well to seek his/her help and then our discipline is different. We are consistent in following expert advice. In the matter of the way we live it can be the same. There is the discipline that we initiate. It is probably better than living a totally undisciplined life, but it is quite dangerous and often ineffective. In today's reading Jeremiah was in a disused well stuck in the mud and there was no way he could get himself out no matter what he tried to do. He had to wait for someone else to throw down a rope. When that happened there was something he had to do. He had to grab hold of the rope and follow instructions. It is the same with us. We believe that there is a God who is wiser than any specialist. All God's delicate love is there inspiring us to take just the right steps to break through into life. The kind of discipline which we need is the discipline to respond to the initiative taken not by us but by God. Besides discipline we need to learn to be attentive to the inspiration of God.

It is God who is the source of our life and when we seek life what we are really seeking is communion with God. This is the sap that gives us life and it is from this communion that the fruit of love and all the other fruits of a full life come. The discipline which we think up may or may not do us good. The best discipline is to be attentive to the inspiration of God and to respond to the discipline which God inspires in us. This is expressed in another verse from today's psalm, one not included in the Responsorial Psalm. Through suffering the psalmist has learned to place his trust in God and he cries: 'Here I am ... I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart'(Psalm 40:7-8 - words applied to Jesus, see Hebrews 10:7).

God knows what discipline is best for us. Whatever is happening to us, God is present guiding us how best to respond in love. Only God can lift us out of the mire, but we must respond to God's initiative and trust in God's grace. We have Jesus' example to inspire us. As he says in today's Gospel, he has come to cast fire upon the earth. He wants us to love and to love with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. This will demand decision of us. He hasn't come to bring peace in the sense that he hasn't come to say that everything is okay. He calls us to decisions that ask us to choose life even if it means causing divisions.

We also have the example of the saints, those wonderful people whose lives are outstanding examples of heroic living. These are what the Second Reading calls a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us in the arena of life and cheering us on as we run to win the prize.

The key to all this is to believe that God is truly present in every circumstance of my life and that God really wants me to live and to live, as Jesus said, to the full. Whoever we are, whether we are young and have to learn to discipline our desires and not destroy our hearts before they

have matured, or whether we are old and have to go through the pain of breaking so that we can mend properly, we are being asked to believe in God and to believe that all that God wants of us is that we learn to receive and to give true love. He gives us his Spirit asking of us that we trust him and courageously follow his guidance. Today's prayer says it well: 'God our Father, may we love you in all things and above all things and reach the joy you have prepared for us beyond all our imagining'.

I'll conclude with a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins. It is called *God's grandeur* (1877):

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

There lives the dearest freshness deep down each one of us. Let us protect it from others and above all from our own pride, greed, lust, envy or sloth. The Spirit of God is calling us even now into life. Let us listen and with whatever discipline is required let us respond. There is no other way to life.