Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:
(Jeremiah 38.4-6, 8-10)
Jeremiah in the Well

The prophet Jeremiah was a peaceable person, whose mission was to threaten the people of Jerusalem with destruction by the might of the approaching Babylonian armies. Their only hope lay not in military efficiency and power or in alliance with foreign nations, but in fidelity to the Lord.

This was not the only message he had to give, for he also foretold that the Exile would bring a new covenant and forgiveness of sin as they repented their infidelities in exile and returned to the Lord. In any case, he tried to escape this mission by pretending to God that he had a stutter, but the Lord told him to quit pretending and get on with the job. The King systematically tore up his prophecies as they were read out, sheet by sheet, but at the same time he had a nasty, sinking feeling that Jeremiah was right. However, his military personnel overruled him and silenced Jeremiah by dumping him in the mud at the bottom of an underground water storage tank.

This reading is chosen to pair with the gospel reading, and so to teach that the message of fidelity to the Lord and to Christ is bound to be a sign of contradiction and to provoke opposition.

Question:
Jeremiah promised that the Lord would write his Law on their hearts (31.33). What did he mean?

Second reading:
(Hebrews 12.1-4)
Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our Faith

Last Sunday's reading from Hebrews celebrated a long procession of figures from the Old Testament who had been sustained by their faith through difficulties and disappointments. This 'great crowd of witnesses' had kept their faith alive heroically on their pilgrimage towards the goal.

The supreme figure, of course, is Jesus, who disregarded the shame of the Cross, and so has taken his seat on the throne of God. With Jesus, a whole new dimension of faith begins.

The two words translated 'pioneer' and 'perfecter' are carefully chosen to express the beginning and the completion of our faith. The former means that he set it in motion and led from the front, not merely a leader but an initiator, without whom it would never have happened. What is meant by 'perfecter'? Jesus brought it all to completion. It is the same word stem as occurs in Jesus' last word on the Cross in John: 'It is complete.' What is complete? The life of Jesus? Jesus' own work? The first Christian community, formed from Mary and the Beloved Disciple? The plan of God? The promises of scripture? None of these can be excluded, for in each of these senses Jesus is the completion.

Question:
Is it true, or just pious, to say that by tending the sick we gain more than we give?

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<u>Gospel</u>: *(Luke 12.49-53)*

Fire to the Earth

What is this? Jesus came to bring peace and harmony, to perfect the fond unity of society and families. How is it then that he can here say exactly the opposite? And without apology! There is no, 'I am afraid there may sometimes be disagreements in the family.' Rather, 'I have come to bring disagreements in the family.' To make things worse, in Judaism, the family is the basic unit that sticks together through thick and thin. Any Jew will be thoroughly shocked by this passage.

We have seen repeatedly that Jesus' statements are often fierce and extreme: 'If your hand causes you to fall, cut it off'; 'Let the dead bury their dead.' Elsewhere he says 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven' - and the traditional let-out clause that he is talking about a small gate in Jerusalem is simply wrong; there was no such gate!

Jesus is teaching that the most sacred earthly ties are less important than loyalty to him. He chooses the family deliberately because it is so sacred and important, but even so, less important than following him.

<u>Question:</u>
Do I ever really convince other people (or even myself) by showing off?