

Homily for the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 38:4–6, 8–10

Psalm 40:2–4, 18

Hebrews 12:1–4

Luke 12:49–53

On this day, August 14, 1941 Maximilian Kolbe was given a lethal injection at Auschwitz.

Months earlier on February 17<sup>th</sup> the Nazis arrested Maximilian in a purge of Poland's clergy and intellectuals. He was sent to the death camp Auschwitz.

There he was stripped of any vestige of his former life. His Franciscan habit was taken away and Maximilian was given a prisoner's striped uniform.

On July 30, 1941, in retaliation for the escape of a prisoner from the camp, ten men in Maximilian's cellblock were chosen at random to be executed.

Maximilian, seeing that one of the prisoners had a wife and children, volunteered to take the man's place. The Nazis were more than willing to accept his generosity.

Maximilian and the other men were stripped naked, locked in a basement cell and left to starve to death. By August 14<sup>th</sup> all the prisoners had died, with the exception of Father Kolbe. A guard entered the cell and administered lethal injection to his heart.

In 1982, Pope John Paul II declared Maximilian a saint, acclaiming him as a

**"martyr for charity."**

The century just past, the twentieth, was perhaps the bloodiest and most inhumane in all the many years of human civilization. We might note all the advancements, technological and otherwise, of this period, but what we became most skilled in was mass death.

We should not look back wistfully on the twentieth century, nor should we be uncritical about the so-called achievement of the modern world.

One of the lessons we might learn from all this is that what we call civilization is a rather thin veneer, and what lies beneath this surface is a terrifying heart of darkness. Christians, who are called to live in the truth, must be realists about this and cannot afford to be naive.

It was in the heart of civilized Europe, among the fading remains of Christian culture, that the death camps were built and millions of innocent men, women and children were put to death for no other reason than that their very existence challenged the ideological conceits of their oppressors.

In the midst of the world's darkness, we are called by our Baptism to be a light in the shadows of this fallen world. Saint Maximilian is one such light, his life and death stands as a testimony to Christ, the eternal light, whom the darkness cannot overcome.

For too many Christians, the faith is a safe routine, a kind of philosophy of self-improvement, something meant to be comfortable and comforting.

The witness of St. Maximilian stands against this illusion. Christian faith is not so much about safety as it is about risk. It is meant to take us out into the world, into the shadows, to be a light to show the way home to those who live in darkness.

Today's readings bring this theme before us with a clarion clarity and highlight that to fix our eyes on Jesus, as Hebrews says, will bring us into conflict with the powers that be. St. Maximilian Kolbe embodied this and the readings say the same thing. Authentically spiritual people will always be opposed.

Why is this? The logic is simple. We live in a world that has gone wrong and is upside down. When we come speaking the truth and looking at the world from God's perspective people will think we are crazy and dangerous.

This is clearly displayed in the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah. Jeremiah was the reluctant prophet. He repeatedly spoke into the community of Israel but time and again his words fell on deaf ears. At one point he gives voice to the struggle this way:

**<sup>9</sup> If I say, "I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,"  
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire  
shut up in my bones,  
and I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot."<sup>1</sup>**

Jeremiah had to speak. And as we read in today's passage he suffered because of it. The word God gives Jeremiah is to have the people surrender to the Babylonians, for if they do not Jerusalem will be destroyed and the devastation and destruction to the city beyond imagining. Now think about this. He was in Jerusalem speaking to the political and military elites, calling them to surrender. Their response is understandable but wrong-headed:

***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."*<sup>52</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Je 20:9). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. (1993). (Je 38:4–5). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Actually he was seeking their welfare but in a way they could not understand. He was willing to speak the truth so contrary to what they saw as rational that they take drastic measures to silence him. They throw him down a cistern where he sank deep into the mud.

He was one speaking the word of God and found himself literally at the bottom of society.

Here is the point. When we consistently speak the word of God the power elites and the dominant ideology will seek to undermine and reject us. They will go to great lengths to shut up the prophetic voice.

Now think about it this way. Israel was a theocratic culture where everybody believed in God. And even there Jeremiah faced such opposition. We live in a radically secular and pluralistic society. In such a society to speak consistently with a Catholic voice about the Church's moral and spiritual teaching will win you few friends and lots of enemies. To speak out against abortion, euthanasia, human trafficking, economic inequalities, the redefining of gender and marriage brings us up against powerful forces that would readily want us to join Jeremiah in that mud filled cistern.

This takes on a particular application in today's Gospel.

This reading may surprise us. Jesus' words don't seem to fit the peaceful "forgive your enemies," "turn the other cheek" image of Jesus that we're used to. In fact, he says quite explicitly that he didn't come to establish peace, but rather, division. What does Jesus mean? Why does he sound so harsh? To understand Jesus' words, we must understand the difference between intentions and reality. Jesus does not say that he desires division; he simply says that it will happen. Maybe you've experienced this. Maybe you've felt alone in your desire to go deeper into your faith. Maybe family members or friends have thought you were strange for becoming Catholic or seeking to live out your Catholic faith more fully. Christians who live out Jesus' teachings will begin to stand out in the world. They will be noticeably different. And that sometimes causes division. They will be misunderstood, looked down upon, or openly criticized by those who do not share the same Christian values. Put simply, it's not easy to be a Christian

For many of us the missing critical dimension of our faith is that sort of zeal that our Lord showed on our behalf. The greatest obstacle we face in this regard is that ours is a culture that stresses personal comfort and fulfillment above all. As C.S. Lewis put it,

***"For wise men of old, the cardinal problem of human life was how to conform the soul to objective reality, and the solution was wisdom, self-discipline, and virtue. For the modern, the cardinal problem is how to conform reality to the wishes of man."***

That quality of culture teaches us to be dissatisfied with discomfort, with struggle, with sacrifice, and it saps our spiritual energy. Jesus in this Gospel passage is shown hungering for

the sacrifice that will win the salvation of the human race, even despising the shame of the cross, as our second reading from Hebrews says. He is a warrior for the good of souls. That is a particularly apt image with reference to this passage from Luke where he asks,

***“Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”***

He of course, doesn't will the opposition he will face from evil men and spirits, nor is he shy in facing it, even unto death, for those who need his help. St. Thomas Aquinas notes that:

***zeal is proportionate to the intensity of love, and the love of true friendship creates a zeal that energetically repels anything that might harm one's friend.***

Such zeal marked the life of Maximilian Kolbe and the Prophet Jeremiah. Such zeal inspired Jesus, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame<sup>3</sup>. Such zeal is a call to us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus who is the author and perfecter of our faith. Such zeal allows us to realize that authentically spiritual people will always be opposed.

St. Vincent de Paul write:

***“You must burn with the love of Christ, or the world will die of the cold.”***

St Maximilian Kolbe burned with that love in the coldest place on earth Auschwitz. So great was his warmth that in 1982 200,000 people gathered in St. Peter's for his canonization.

“Martyr of charity”, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, prayer for us, that we too would burn with the passionate zeal of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.* (1993). (Heb 12:2). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.