

20th Sunday in ORDINARY TIME (Year C)

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

Hebrews 12:1-4

Luke 12:49-53

The Scandal of Truth

"The scandal of truth" could be the title of our reflection on today's liturgy. The truth proclaimed by the prophet Jeremiah scandalizes his contemporaries (first reading). Jesus' words on the fire of judgment, on baptism in the blood of the Cross and on the sword that divides, also scandalize his listeners, because they did not correspond to the listeners' expectations. And aren't people often scandalized by divine teaching when it resorts to correction and punishment?

DOCTRINAL MESSAGE

The Scandal of Jeremiah

Jeremiah was a sensitive and tranquil man by nature. He loved beauty, and by divine vocation had to preach destruction and horrendous massacres. He loved tranquility and quiet, and found himself totally involved in the risky and unfortunate events in Jerusalem and in the kingdom of Judah.

The God who had seduced him induced him to say unpleasant and unexpected things, and to undertake symbolic actions that aroused indignation and adversity. His words and actions scandalized the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah. And "to scandalize" meant, to those who listened to him, that he was not seeking the welfare of the people but their ruin, that he was a pessimist and a spoilsport who disheartened the soldiers and the people. However, Jeremiah knows that he is telling the truth, a truth that he has not invented himself but that he has heard in the intimacy of his conscience as the Word of God.

The scandal of truth will make Jeremiah suffer (he will be put into a storage-well full of mud to die there forgotten and abandoned by all). But it does not matter, for he knows that God will not abandon him (he will save him by means of an Ethiopian, a pagan), and that God's truth which he has conveyed will prevail and triumph. And so it was. Jerusalem was taken and destroyed by Babylon, and most of the population was deported to and enslaved in the land of the winners.

DOCTRINAL MESSAGE

The Scandal of Jesus Christ

Jesus addresses his contemporaries with wounding and scandalous words. He talks about the fire of judgment, capable of burning and destroying the present situation to generate a new one, but his listeners are not ready to accept the radical change or the eruption of newness.

Jesus talks about baptism with reference to the blood of the Cross, in which he will have to be baptized to wash away the sins of the world which he has taken upon himself. But what is the need for this baptism? Isn't John's baptism sufficient, or that of the Essenes? The Cross is a scandal for the Jews, Paul will remind us in the first Letter to the Corinthians.

Jesus clearly says that he has not come to bring peace on earth, but the sword that divides men: with Christ or against Christ, with no possibility of being neutral. This sword of division greatly scandalized the Jews. They do not know how to interpret correctly the three signs that Jesus offers his contemporaries, and they are scandalized! The truth that Jesus Christ preaches to them is an unbearable scandal, a scandal that cost Jesus Christ his condemnation and an ignominious death on the Cross

DOCTRINAL MESSAGE

The Scandal of God

Not only Jeremiah, not only Jesus, but God himself may cause a scandal. The community to whom the Letter to the Hebrews was addressed might have thought that it was a scandal that God should allow them to go through so much suffering.

They might also have been presented the scandal of martyrdom, the shedding of their own blood. How could God have allowed the forces of evil to intervene in such a manifest way?

It is for this reason that the author of the Letter invites the people to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus, who leads them in their faith and brings it to perfection. He endured the Cross, disregarding the shame of it, and has taken his seat at the right of God's throne. In more colloquial language, we might say, "Are you scandalized? Look at Jesus Christ on the Cross! Are you disheartened by this prospect? Look at Jesus Christ sitting at the right of God's throne!" In the light of Christ, your scandal will become a witness of faith and glory.

PASTORAL SUGGESTION

Scandalizing will Get Something Across

I am not recommending immoral scandal, like scandalizing children with evil actions or actions that they do not have the ability to judge. I am proposing the scandal of truth, and truth may not please. It may be more or less appropriate, but it will never be labeled as immoral.

I propose that we repeat many times this scandal of truth, so that this repetition may generate at least a question, an incentive, a step forward in the effort to know it.

Indeed, isn't there a whole set of truths that scandalize many people today?

- For example, the truth of one unique Savior of Humankind, our Lord Jesus Christ, the center and fulcrum of history and the cosmos.
- There is the truth of one unique Church, founded by Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, or
- the truth of one unique Creator of the universe and of human beings.
- We have the truth of a triune God, actively engaged in the history of human beings and their destiny; or

- the truth of a priestly people, without any distinction based on sex, but of a priestly ministry, to which God calls only men.
- So many truths: that of marriage, constituted exclusively by the stable union between a man and a woman, or
- that of the universal destiny of all the goods of the earth, etc.

These truths are a scandal to many ears in our society. Rather than keeping them to ourselves, let's talk about them, let's tell them now and again, in different ways, with the simplicity and conviction that truth itself entails. Let us speak about them in public and in private: priests, educators, religion teachers, catechists, theologians and bishops. Let us scandalize our society with the fundamental truths of Christian faith and morality!

PASTORAI SUGGESTION

The Truth will Set You Free

In a social environment in which truth seems to be the cause of slavery and bondage, because both the nature of truth and the human ability for it are ignored or scorned, we Christians are convinced that truth in itself, especially the truth of our faith, sets us free.

Actually, all truth contributes to building the person and the Christian in more specific identity and personality. And it is clear that the more we identify with our human and Christian identity, the better and more fully we will experience the true freedom of being what we are meant to be, according to our nature, to what is written in the great book of God's revelation. The person is not free to be what he wishes: he is free to be the truth of his being.

Freedom is not an absolute value, it must be related to truth, which in itself attracts and conquers us. Where there is truth there is freedom, and where truth is lacking, there is necessarily some form of slavery. Are we seeking the truth? Do we live in truth? Do we love truth? Do we defend the truth? Then we may say that we are genuinely free, even if we are closed within the four walls of a prison cell or we are considered "useless material" by society around us.

Are we perhaps afraid of the truth, of its conquering power? Yes, in a relative world, perhaps we are afraid of absolute truths.

However, if everything is relative, aren't we turning what is relative into the only absolute? Ultimately, to be afraid of the truth is to be afraid to be one's self. It means letting one's self be dominated by the absolute law of the majority, losing human dignity. Truth will set you free. Have no doubts. This is the experience of the great.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Scandal of Jeremiah

Part 1: The Inner Conflict of Jeremiah

- **Initial prompt:** The text describes Jeremiah as "sensitive and tranquil by nature" and a lover of "beauty." How does this description contrast with the mission God gives him: to "preach destruction and horrendous massacres"?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - What kind of internal struggle do you imagine Jeremiah faced?
 - Have you ever felt a conflict between who you are and what you felt you had to do? How does Jeremiah's experience resonate with or differ from your own?
 - The text says he "found himself totally involved in the risky and unfortunate events in Jerusalem." What does this suggest about the nature of prophetic calling? Is it something one chooses, or something one is chosen for?

Part 2: The Scandal of Truth

- **Initial prompt:** Jeremiah's words and actions are described as "scandalizing" the people of Jerusalem and Judah. What does the text say "to scandalize" meant to them?

- **Follow-up questions:**

- Why would his message—that disaster was coming—be seen as "not seeking the welfare of the people"?
- The people saw him as a "pessimist and a spoilsport." How do we often react to difficult or unwelcome truths today? Can you think of examples where a messenger of bad news is blamed for the news itself?
- The text states Jeremiah "knows that he is telling the truth, a truth that he has not invented himself but that he has heard in the intimacy of his conscience as the Word of God." What is the significance of this distinction? How does it empower him to endure the public opposition?

Part 3: Suffering, Salvation, and Triumph

- **Initial prompt:** The discussion of Jeremiah's suffering is stark: he is "put into a storage-well full of mud to die there forgotten and abandoned by all." The text immediately follows this with the phrase, "But it does not matter..." Why does it not matter to Jeremiah?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - What does the text suggest is the source of his strength and endurance? (Hint: "he knows that God will not abandon him...")
 - Jeremiah is saved by an Ethiopian, a "pagan." What might be the theological significance of a non-Jew

being the instrument of his salvation? What does this say about God's reach and the nature of who is used for His purposes?

- The text concludes that "God's truth which he has conveyed will prevail and triumph." In what way did Jeremiah's truth triumph, and what was the ultimate outcome for Jerusalem and its people?
- How does the story of Jeremiah challenge the idea that a prophet's success is measured by popular acceptance or a comfortable life? What, then, defines the success of a prophet?

Concluding Thoughts

- **Final questions for reflection:** What is the enduring lesson of Jeremiah's story for us today? What does it teach us about the nature of truth, the cost of speaking it, and the ultimate source of hope and endurance?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Scandal of Jesus Christ

Part 1: The Wounding and Scandalous Words

- **Initial prompt:** The text begins by stating Jesus uses "wounding and scandalous words." What specific examples does the text provide for this claim?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - Why would Jesus's talk of a "fire of judgment" be so difficult for his listeners to accept? What kind of "radical change" or "eruption of newness" do you think he was referring to?
 - The passage mentions that Jesus's listeners were "not ready" for this change. What does this suggest about the human tendency to resist disruption, even when it might be for the better?
 - Can you think of examples in our own time where a message of radical change is met with resistance or even hostility?

Part 2: The Scandal of the Cross and Baptism

- **Initial prompt:** The passage highlights two interconnected scandals: Jesus's talk of "baptism with reference to the blood of the Cross" and the Cross itself being a "scandal for

the Jews." Why was the Cross such a stumbling block?

- **Follow-up questions:**

- The text asks, "what is the need for this baptism?" It then contrasts Jesus's baptism with John's and that of the Essenes. What is the fundamental difference between these forms of baptism, and why would Jesus's be so much more offensive or unnecessary-seeming to his contemporaries?
- Paul, in 1 Corinthians, calls the Cross a "stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." Based on the text, why do you think it was so scandalous specifically to the Jews? (Consider their expectations for a Messiah).
- The Cross, for many, is the ultimate symbol of love and sacrifice. How do you reconcile this with the idea that it was originally an "ignominious death" and a "scandal"?

Part 3: The Scandal of Division

- **Initial prompt:** The text quotes Jesus: "he has not come to bring peace on earth, but the sword that divides men." How does this statement challenge the common perception of Jesus as a bringer of peace and unity?
- **Follow-up questions:**

- The passage describes this as a division of "with Christ or against Christ, with no possibility of being neutral." What does this statement demand of a person? Why would this lack of neutrality be so scandalous and difficult for people to accept?
- The text says the Jews "do not know how to interpret correctly the three signs that Jesus offers his contemporaries, and they are scandalized!" What might these "three signs" be, and why would a misunderstanding of them lead to scandal rather than understanding?
- In what ways do we still see this "sword of division" at work in the world today, both inside and outside of religious contexts?

Concluding Thoughts

Final prompt for reflection: The text concludes that the truth Jesus preached was an "unbearable scandal" that led to his condemnation and death. What does this suggest about the nature of truth itself? Is genuine, transformative truth always met with resistance and difficulty? What is the enduring message of "The Scandal of Jesus Christ"?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Scandal of God

Part 1: The Scandal of Suffering

- **Initial prompt:** The text suggests that the community addressed in the Letter to the Hebrews might have been "scandalized" that God would allow them to go through so much suffering. What does this reveal about the common human expectation of what a relationship with God should look like?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - Have you ever felt a sense of scandal or disillusionment with God because of personal suffering or the suffering you've witnessed in the world?
 - The text implies that people might have expected God to prevent their suffering. What is the source of this expectation, and how does it often clash with the reality of the human experience?
 - Can you think of other instances in the Bible or in history where people expressed a similar "scandal" with God's perceived inaction in the face of injustice or pain?

Part 2: The Scandal of Martyrdom

- **Initial prompt:** The text specifically mentions the "scandal of martyrdom" and asks, "How could God have allowed the forces of evil to intervene in such a manifest way?" What is particularly scandalous about martyrdom compared to other forms of suffering?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - Martyrdom represents the ultimate sacrifice for one's faith. Why would someone who gives their life for God still feel "scandalized" that God allowed it to happen?
 - How does the existence of "forces of evil" challenging a believer's life and faith present a profound theological problem? How might this challenge one's understanding of God's power or goodness?
 - What might the community have been expecting God to do in the face of these "forces of evil" that He did not do?

Part 3: The Response to the Scandal: Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus

- **Initial prompt:** The author of Hebrews offers a powerful solution to this scandal: "keep their eyes fixed on Jesus." How does looking at Jesus's life and death address the questions raised by the scandal of suffering and martyrdom?

- **Follow-up questions:**

- The text notes that Jesus "endured the Cross, disregarding the shame of it." Why is it significant that he "disregarded the shame"? What does this tell us about the nature of his endurance?
- The second half of the solution is to look at Jesus "sitting at the right of God's throne." What does this image of Jesus's exaltation and triumph offer to someone who is suffering or facing persecution?
- The concluding quote uses colloquial language: "Are you scandalized? Look at Jesus Christ on the Cross! Are you disheartened by this prospect? Look at Jesus Christ sitting at the right of God's throne." What is the powerful, two-part message being conveyed here?

Concluding Thoughts

- **Final questions for reflection:** The text connects the "scandal of God" directly to the "scandal of the Cross." How does the story of Jesus transform the idea of suffering from a sign of God's absence or weakness into a potential source of strength, hope, and ultimate victory? What is the ultimate message of the Letter to the Hebrews on this issue?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Scandalizing will Get Something Across

Part 1: Defining "The Scandal of Truth"

- **Initial prompt:** The notes makes a critical distinction between "immoral scandal" and "the scandal of truth." How does the text define the latter, and what is its purpose?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - Why insist that "truth may not please" but "will never be labeled as immoral"? What does this imply about the relationship between truth and popular opinion?
 - The notes suggests that repeating "the scandal of truth" can "generate at least a question, an incentive, a step forward in the effort to know it." What is the logic behind this claim? Do you agree that a shocking or challenging truth is more likely to be engaged with than a comfortable one?
 - Can you think of other contexts (outside of religion) where a difficult or unpopular truth, when spoken, has provoked a necessary conversation or change?

Part 2: The Specifics of Scandalous Truths

- **Initial prompt:** The text lists several specific "truths" that it claims are scandalous to many people today. What are a few of the examples provided, and why do you think they

are considered scandalous in our current society?

- **Follow-up questions:**

- Choose one of the truths listed (e.g., the unique salvific role of Jesus, the nature of the Church, the unique Creator, the nature of marriage, the all-male priesthood). Why might this particular belief be seen as exclusive, intolerant, or otherwise problematic by many people today?
- The text frames these beliefs as "fundamental truths of Christian faith and morality." How does framing them this way—rather than as opinions or traditions—change the nature of the conversation?
- Is it possible for a truth to be both "fundamental" to one group and deeply offensive or even harmful to another? How should that tension be navigated?

Part 3: The Call to Action

- **Initial prompt:** The notes issues a strong call to action: "Let us scandalize our society with the fundamental truths of Christian faith and morality!" Who does the notes specifically call upon to do this, and what is the prescribed method?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - The notes urges people to "talk about them, let's tell them now and again, in different ways, with the

simplicity and conviction that truth itself entails."

What does "simplicity and conviction" mean in this context? How might one speak a scandalous truth without being perceived as aggressive, self-righteous, or hateful?

- The passage suggests speaking these truths in "public and in private." What are the potential challenges and rewards of doing so in each of these settings?
- Based on your own experiences, do you think this approach is more likely to create dialogue or division? What factors might determine the outcome?

Concluding Thoughts

- **Final question for reflection:** The text advocates for a proactive and somewhat confrontational approach to proclaiming Christian truths. What is the potential benefit of this strategy? What are the potential pitfalls? Ultimately, what responsibility does a believer have to "scandalize" with truth, and where does that responsibility end?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Truth Will Set You Free

Part 1: Redefining Freedom

- **Initial prompt:** The text begins by stating that in our society, "truth seems to be the cause of slavery and bondage." How is this modern perception of truth different from the one the notes is proposing?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - The passage says, "The person is not free to be what he wishes: he is free to be the truth of his being." What is the fundamental difference between these two ideas of freedom? Can you think of examples of each in our world today?
 - The notes argue that freedom is not an "absolute value" but "must be related to truth." What does this mean in practice? How does a person's understanding of truth inform their understanding of freedom?
 - The text suggests that "all truth contributes to building the person." How can understanding truths—both secular and spiritual—help a person develop a more specific identity and personality?

Part 2: The Dangers of Relativism

- **Initial prompt:** The passage claims that "where truth is lacking, there is necessarily some form of slavery." What are some of the "forms of slavery" that the author might be referring to?
- **Follow-up questions:**
 - The text asks, "if everything is relative, aren't we turning what is relative into the only absolute?" What is the critique of a completely relativistic worldview here? Do you agree with this assessment?
 - The notes also suggests that "to be afraid of the truth is to be afraid to be one's self." Why would a fear of absolute truth equate to a fear of one's own being?
 - The passage warns against "letting one's self be dominated by the absolute law of the majority." How does the concept of truth as a fixed, external reality protect against this kind of social pressure?

Part 3: The Power of Truth

- **Initial prompt:** The text offers a powerful claim: "Then we may say that we are genuinely free, even if we are closed within the four walls of a prison cell." How can a person be physically unfree yet "genuinely free"?
- **Follow-up questions:**

- What does it mean to "love truth" or "defend the truth" in our daily lives? What is the role of personal conviction in living out this kind of freedom?
- The passage ends with the statement, "This is the experience of the great." Who are some of the "great" figures, both religious and secular, who have exemplified this kind of freedom through their commitment to truth, even at great personal cost?

Concluding Thoughts

Final questions for reflection: The text presents a stark choice between a freedom defined by truth and a freedom defined by self-will, which it labels as a form of slavery. What is the most compelling argument the notes makes for the connection between truth and freedom? What are the biggest challenges in living out this kind of freedom in our world today?