

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Aug. 19, 2007)

I don't know if every family has at least one eccentric relative that provides a lot of laughs, some of it on purpose, and some of it in spite of him or herself. In my family it was my mother's sister, my aunt Mary, whom many referred to fondly as Auntie Mame. Do you all remember Auntie Mame?

Well, my Aunt Mary or Auntie Mame had some interesting ideas about social conduct. She used to say that there were two topics that no one should ever broach in polite company: religion and politics. I'm afraid that neither Jeremiah the prophet nor Jesus would have passed her test for polite company because both of them never hesitated to talk about religion and even on occasion about politics. And both of them got into trouble for it, especially because they did it in front of the people who most resented it.

Jeremiah did not hesitate to tell the king and the political leaders of his time that their troubles were a punishment from God for their sins. At least that's how Jeremiah interpreted it. And what were their sins? First of all, the worst sin, they had turned their backs on their God and had forgotten the covenant. Second of all, and the second worst sin, they were not taking care of the poor as God had reminded them so often was their duty.

What really got the prophet into trouble was his telling the soldiers they should not bother fighting the Babylonians because they were not going to win. This kind of talk demoralized the army and as far as the king was concerned it was treason. So he had Jeremiah thrown into a well and left to die. Fortunately it was the dry season; there was no water at the bottom of the well. Jeremiah did not drown, but there was plenty of mud and the prophet got very dirty. A foreign dignitary intervened in Jeremiah's behalf, and so he was dragged half dead – and very muddy – from the well. As it turned out he was right. The Babylonians did defeat the Israelites and carried them off into captivity. It was the beginning of a seventy-year exile which the prophets in general interpreted much the same way Jeremiah did: Israel had sinned and God was punishing them.

Jesus of course got into trouble, too. The things he said were not

directly political. They were generally religious, but they sometimes had political repercussions, so eventually, the powers that be could not stand it any longer and they plotted his death.

Jesus is always saying challenging things. But today's Gospel passage has statements that are not only challenging, but also startling and puzzling. "Do you think I have come to bring peace on the earth? I assure you the contrary is true; I have come for division." What's this? Jesus has come for division? Wouldn't you think the opposite was true? That Jesus had indeed come for peace, to put back together what had been divided by sin? Of course you would, and that indeed is the reason why Jesus came. So what is going on here?

Well, first of all, Jesus did not come in order to bring the kind of division he talks about. Rather division occurs because some people accept Jesus and his teaching and some people do not. This was certainly a situation the Jesus knew in his own lifetime and the community that Luke was writing for had experienced the same thing. Families indeed were divided according to how they accepted or did not accept Jesus.

Now, what has all of this got to do with us? It seems to me the kind of division Jesus was talking about still exists, in our city, in our nation, in our world, in our church. And still today, the people who try to point this out are arrested, vilified, even killed. Think of Dorothy Day who was an embarrassment to the church in the beginning; think of the Berrigans whom Catholics denounced as insane and traitorous; think of the ones who were martyred: Oscar Romero, the Jesuits and their housekeepers in El Salvador, Martin Luther King Junior, countless others, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, who had the courage to stand up to the powers that be and say, "You are wrong."

As I contemplate the Jesus of this challenging Gospel passage, I hear him say to me, "Don't think that I came to bring an easy peace to this world. I came to bring peace, yes, but I didn't come to mask the misery of the world, so that nobody can see it anymore. Don't think I came to pull a blanket over all the coldness of human relations so that the shivering can no longer be felt. No, I didn't come to bring that kind of peace. I came to bring a fight, a battle, a struggle, a fire to undo all the evil in the world." And then I see him look me right in the eye and say, "You, you should join in my fight

against that evil, against that sin.”

It sounds pretty dire, doesn't it, pretty grim? It's a challenge, of course, and it's not all as somber as it might seem to be. The passage from the letter to the Hebrews reminds us of our destiny once the struggle is over. The Irish have a wonderful way of talking about the good times that come after the bad. They even describe heaven this way. They say it is the tavern at the end of the road where all together we will lift the cup – very earthy imagery and very Irish. But describe it any way you want. The point is it makes all the disciples' pain – our pain - worthwhile.