

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

Psalm 40:2, 3, 4, 18

Hebrews 12:1-4

Luke 12:49-53

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Holbrook Jackson (1874-1948) is nearly forgotten today, but during the first third of the twentieth century, Jackson, a Fabian socialist, was a respected figure in British cultural life. In 1911, taking his example perhaps from Nietzsche, Jackson published a volume of aphorisms entitled *Platitudes in the Making*. An aphorism is a short witty saying that aspires to express a truth. Yogi Berra, for example, was an *accidental* aphorist. His off the cuff remarks became famous epigrams like, “It’s déjà vu all over again” or “When you come to a fork in the road...take it.” Holbrook Jackson presented a complementary copy of his book to his great contemporary, G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936). Chesterton is esteemed today as perhaps the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century.

Years after Chesterton’s death, his copy of *Platitudes in the Making* was discovered in a San Francisco bookstore. It turns out that, as he read, Chesterton had used a green pencil to jot down on the book’s pages responses to Jackson’s aphorisms. Remarkably, Chesterton’s off-hand comments on Jackson’s highly polished thoughts are far wittier and more engaging than the aphorisms themselves. Here are a few examples of what I mean:

Jackson wrote, “A man is a ship: his religion a harbor. Few men sail the high seas.” Chesterton replied, “No men do, except to find a harbor

somewhere.” Jackson declared, “No two men have exactly the same religion: a church, like society, is a compromise.” Chesterton responded, “The same religion has the two men. The sun shines on the evil and the good. But the sun does not compromise.” Jackson wrote, “In a society worthy of the name all men would be artists – without knowing it.” Chesterton replied, “They all are: but without *you* knowing it.”

Why are Chesterton’s spur of the moment jottings so much better than Jackson’s carefully crafted epigrams? I think it’s because Chesterton’s thought occurs in the context of his faith. When he responds to an idea, he doesn’t have to start from scratch. Rather, his thoughts flow out of his conviction that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). In the words of our Second Reading, he keeps his “eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.” And notice that his faith doesn’t turn him into a dull, joyless ideologue. On the contrary, it allows his mind to dance gracefully with whatever it encounters. His mind is a flint striking sparks off a rock, but there would be no sparks if there were no rock. In his writing, Chesterton is a kind of performance artist, cutting capers for Christ.

We encounter another kind of spiritual performance artist in our First Reading. Everything the prophet Jeremiah said or did in public was an expression of God’s will. He didn’t confine his message to words. Nor was he dull. On one occasion he fastened a cattle yoke to his shoulders and refused to remove it until another prophet broke it off him (Jeremiah 28). Another time he buried his loincloth under a rock. After a long time he dug it up and wore it again (Jeremiah 13). Both of these demonstrations were fraught with meaning in the circumstances of his time. However astonishing his actions, Jeremiah wasn’t a frivolous

person. So much is evident from today's First Reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.

The year is 586 B.C. The armies of the great Babylonian conqueror, Nebuchadnezzar II are besieging Jerusalem. Jeremiah has been going around town proclaiming that the city is doomed. The princes of the city go to King Zedekiah and complain, quite reasonably, that Jeremiah's pronouncements are demoralizing the soldiers who are defending the city. Zedekiah tells the princes they can do whatever they like with Jeremiah. They lower the prophet into a cistern with no food and water. Eventually, Jeremiah is released from the cistern, but the significant thing is that he insists on proclaiming the word God has given him, even when it runs entirely counter to what people want to hear – even when it endangers his life. No doubt, that is the reason this scripture passage has been chosen to accompany the hard sayings of Jesus in today's Gospel.

Our Lord's remarks boil down to this: "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." The idea is that Christ calls not just individuals, but whole human societies to conversion. Therefore, in their everyday lives, committed Christians can't just embrace whatever conventional wisdom happens to prevail in their societies. They can't just go along to get along. Too many people today operate on the assumption, "I'm basically a good person, so I'm sure that as I go through life I will make basically good choices." History shows that this sublime self-confidence is foolhardy. Think, for example, of the sentiments that sweep through a society on the eve of some war or military intervention. Virtually everyone seems to think that the war is a marvelous idea, and they can't wait to get started. Years later, as often as not, everyone seems to think that the war was actually a bad idea. By

then, of course, it's too late. A Christian can't, in conscience, just go with the flow. The consequences of doing so are summed up in the terrible connotations of the phrase, "a good German." And it isn't just war. The same temptation to go long with what everyone else seems to take for granted has application to attitudes toward immigrants, abortion, economics, the environment; the list can be extended indefinitely. In each instance, Christians are called to hold their society's beliefs up to the light of Christ, and act upon what is revealed. As Jeremiah could testify, to do so can be hard and dangerous and divisive. You can easily end up at the bottom of a cistern. Chesterton wrote that Catholicism is the only thing strong enough to save someone from the awful fate of being a person of his or her time. But it will only save us if we are true to it.

Our fidelity to the truth of Christ does not mean that we are fated to be boring old drudges – anymore than Jeremiah was boring – anymore than Chesterton was a drudge. Rather, we like them are performance artists who aspire to give expression by our words and actions to the joyful hope that Christ has loosed in our lives and in the world. We are flints striking sparks in which the light of the world is revealed. And so we keep our eyes on Christ, and dance.