

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Fr. Robert J. Gaestel

Hebrews 12:1-14

St. Luke 12:49-56

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Do you have a favorite Bible verse or Bible story? If you have any familiarity with the Bible, you must have a preference for some parts of it for no other reason than the Bible is just too big to hold it all in, and just too varied to evoke a single response. It has been said that every human situation, every human story can be found in the Bible somewhere. So, among everything that can be found in the Bible there will be some things we like, and others we don't. Not only that, but over time our preferences can change. For the longest time, my favorite Bible verse was from the Book of Revelation: "A quart of wheat for a denarius, two quarts of barley for a denarius, but do not harm oil and wine." After becoming a Volunteer Chaplain for the Pasadena Police Department—and they would tell you, "Fr. Bob did everything except rappel out of a helicopter—my favorite Bible verse changed and became, "And they entered the garden with lanterns, torches, and weapons."

But seriously folks, the reason why the *Book of Common Prayer* contains a lectionary, that is an ordered set of Scripture readings to be used in worship both Sunday and daily, is to keep us from getting stuck with only what we like to hear, and forcing us to consider things we don't particularly like to hear. The lectionary serves to keep clergy from riding their personal hobby horse over the backs of lay people, while forcing all of the People of God, laity and clergy to consider things they'd rather not hear, not think about, and rather not have to decide. We come to a fork in the road. Like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, who after a whole life time of, "on the one hand, and on the other hand," comes to the place of "there is no other hand," the place of the Real Thing.

Today's Scriptures are all about the Real Thing, and how the Real Thing is not welcomed with open arms, but rather opposed both strenuously and implacably. For Jeremiah, the Real Thing is not ephemeral like dreams that though in deep sleep in the dead of night may be vivid, and maybe even in color, but vanish like wisps of smoke with rising dawn; the Real Thing is "like fire and like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces." The reading from Hebrews anticipates the hymn *Before Thy Throne O God We Kneel*, which asks that God "give us a conscience quick to feel, a ready mind to understand the meaning of thy chastening hand." In the Gospel, Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace on Earth, but rather division." Wait a minute. I thought you were supposed to be the Prince of Peace. What gives? Jesus says, "I am that alright, but spelled not PEACE, but PIECE." I will be the cause of a fissure, a rupture between you and all you hold dear."

This may call to mind the 9th Chapter of St. John's Gospel, the story of the Man Born Blind. Jesus's opponents call the healing, "Fake News." They deny that the man was blind to begin with. They say that the blind man was switched out, replaced by one who sees and always could see. They call the parent to make a positive identification, and they confirm that the man who now sees is their son and that he was born blind. When asked how that can be they dodge the question by answering they don't know how their son who was born blind now sees. They say that their son is an adult and can speak for himself. At this point, St. John makes an editorial comment: "They said this because they were afraid of the Jews because the Jews had agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Christ was to be put out of the synagogue." Well, okay. But this didn't happen during Jesus's earthly ministry. Today's Gospel from St. Luke anticipates this, but it hasn't happened yet. But by the time St. John wrote his Gospel, this was an accomplished fact. While for St. Luke in both his Gospel,

and his Acts of the Apostles, Christians and Jews were in the process of separating, with St. John the break was complete.

What St. John said then is true today. Anyone who holds that Jesus is the Messiah cannot belong to a synagogue. Some years back a young woman from a non-observant Jewish background started coming to Church of the Angels. I did not proselytize her, but answered the questions she put to me. Her non-observant uncle started giving her the third degree. I told her, "There is a word for this. It's called persecution. Tell him to knock it off."

Yes absolutely, the Real Thing evokes opposition. How could it be otherwise? The Real Thing imposes demands that most human beings find enormously difficult and very unpleasant. These unpleasant and difficult things are: changing and thinking. A person I know describes it this way: "Most people would find it easier to lug around a 50-pound bag of Portland Cement than to have think long and hard about something important." To raise the ante, replace the word "important" with "unbearable." Or, to put it another way, what makes it unbearable is how important it really is.

A psychoanalyst describes their work this way. "What we do is to focus on the unbearable experiences of everyday life. We're interested in that. We care about how people's hearts and minds are not all of a piece, that people are in conflict and they try to live their lives in a way that keeps them from being torn up by conflicting feelings, motives, goals, and loyalties. We're trying to get people to do something that we think it would be very useful for them to do, but they are very sure the don't want to do. We are trying to help people to think about themselves in exactly the way either they don't want to or can't."

There is something at stake here. It is not about changing preferences from chocolate to vanilla, from cola to lemon-lime. It's not from conservative to liberal or vice-versa. It's not changing the color scheme of your bathroom. It's not your sexual orientation, taste in music, being introverted or extraverted, a night-owl who sleeps until noon or an early bird awakening before the sun rises and goes to sleep before sunset. No, in the face of the Real Thing, what's at stake and at the bottom of one's heart and mind, is knowing that the Real Thing requires that we make changes in thought and action so as to live our life as the Real Thing asks us to live it. This is not attractive to everyone, and it is pleasant for no one. And Jesus, in saying that he has come to cast fire on earth and how he is just bursting at the seams until it is accomplished, reveals that what is at stake is nothing less than salvation or its opposite.

What is salvation? Here is a definition pieced together from writings of the 20th Century Roman Catholic theologian, Henri de Lubac. "Salvation is the fulfillment of our human nature in our being delivered from evil, which is all too real, and triumphing over death which is all too real, by our coming to see God as God really is in our being incorporated into the divine life shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." In other words, the Real Thing, as opposed to the unreal thing which is nothing at all.

What is the Real Thing? In the current issue of *The New Yorker*, there is an article about Guy Consolmagno, a Jesuit lay-brother (not a priest) who is the Director of the Vatican Observatory. Several parishioners from COA went up to the observatory on Mt. Wilson to hear him give a talk. We had a great time. In the article he speaks about the New Atheists and how they invoke what he calls a "straw God." He says, "An atheist, in order to be an atheist, has to have a clear idea of who is

the God they don't believe in." Brother Guy says, "When I say I believe in God, it means, I believe in **one** God, which means there is a whole lot of versions of God I don't believe in." Brother Guy says he is interested in God as the Real Thing. And as a scientist he wants to find out what God really does, how God really does it, which is what God really likes to do and how God really likes to do it."

When Jeremiah speaks of prophets who talk about their dreams, we could think of biases operative in our minds all the time such as confirmation bias, anchor bias, narrative fallacy bias, loss aversion bias, herd mentality, framing bias, self-serving bias, over-confidence bias. All of these things within us get in the way of our perceiving the Real Thing. Of course, this makes the Real Thing a contested issue. How can we resolve it?

Today's reading from Hebrews offers us help in two ways. First of all, it speaks of us being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. The great cloud of witnesses shows what over time really works. There is a new book out by historian Diarmaid MacCulloch titled Lower than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity. Talk about a contested issue! On this side of Christ's return, we might well doubt that we'll ever get this right. However, one can certainly say that through all time, everything has been tried, so that a great cloud of witnesses can at least show what doesn't work very well. The second thing Hebrews talks about is endurance. The family motto of the Antarctic explorer Earnest Shackleton was "By Endurance, We Conquer." It doesn't say by, might, by skill, by cleverness, by good luck. It says by endurance. That means to remain steadfast on the side of the Real Thing until the unreal thing wears itself out because in the end, it's really like the foolish man who built his house upon the sand and that at long last was lost to time and tide.

The hymn *Before Thy Throne O God We Kneel*, ends with, "Let thy fierce fires that burns and try, our inmost spirits purify; consume the ill, purge out the shame; O God be with us in the flame; a new born people may we rise, more pure, more true, more nobly rise." So that as God is the Real Thing, in him, so are we.