

- In Matthew 16, when Jesus asks His disciples who people believe Him to be, they respond: “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets,” which indicates that the prophet Jeremiah was an influential Old Testament figure.
- In fact, many biblical scholars believe that Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant,” whose text we read every year in Lent to speak about Christ’s sufferings, was actually modeled on Jeremiah, who certainly suffered a great deal in his work as a prophet.
- Our first reading today details some of Jeremiah’s suffering. Called as a youth to the life of a prophet, Jeremiah reluctantly submitted to his vocation.
- But once he did, God’s Spirit moved powerfully within him, enabling him to prophesy the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity.
- Those who resented his message of divine chastisement as punishment for disobedience to God plotted his death. Jeremiah endured persecution, imprisonment, and torture; conflict and division were his daily bread. Yet, he remained faithful to his call.
- Jeremiah’s life of suffering raises the question of why God allows His faithful ones to undergo such pain, cruelty, and injustice. Why was a man so intent upon reuniting God’s chosen people back with God allowed by God to be treated so badly?
- I think St. Peter gives us the best answer. In 1 Peter 2:19-21, we read:

*For whenever anyone bears the pain of unjust suffering because of consciousness of God, that is a grace. But what credit is there if you are patient when beaten for doing wrong? But if you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good, this is a grace before God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.*

- St. Peter tells us that suffering unjustly is a grace, and that God allows His chosen ones to suffer unjustly because Christ Himself was subjected to the same thing! In other words, if we are going to be Christ’s true followers, we must imitate Him and follow His example.
- Indeed, my friends, if we are going to be Christians with integrity, we must expect conflict and division. We must expect to be treated badly at times.
- Very interestingly, conflict and division is the theme of our Gospel today.
- Our Lord says in the Gospel today: “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! . . . Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”
- While there has always been and always will be a division between good and evil, between the just and unjust, Jesus also allows divisions to persist even between people of good will.
- There are times when our division is not with enemies, but with our most dear loved ones. Jesus speaks about this today as He says:

*From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.*

- The point here is that peace in this life cannot be our highest good or our only goal.

- Our Lord is clear: He did not come to establish peace on the earth, but to reveal to man the narrow gate that alone leads to Heaven. It's called a narrow gate because it's difficult to fit through it.
- The narrow gate that leads to Heaven can only be accessed by the meek and the humble, by those who have repented of their sins, by those who believe in our Lord and acknowledge Him as Savior and King.
- The proud and haughty, those who glory in their sins rather than abhor them, and those who fail to recognize our Lord *as* Lord will never enter, and eternal hellfire will be their lot.
- Of course, no one likes to be told they are a sinner. No one likes to hear they're going to hell. No one likes to be told that they're not in the right.
- This is why Jeremiah was so persecuted. This is why Jesus was unjustly condemned and sacrificed. This is why sometimes, we too must suffer.
- What's important is that we live our Catholic faith with authenticity.
- What's important is that we "rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us, while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith," as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us today.
- But living our faith with integrity is only the beginning. Indeed, my brothers and sisters, we must be so convinced of the Truth of what Christ teaches us through His Church that we are willing to suffer the loss of relationships with loved ones rather than deny or disobey it.
- We must be willing to suffer the pain that division with others brings in order to remain true to Jesus and to help others know Him. That's the meaning of today's Gospel.
- There can be no doubt that living our Catholic faith with integrity is difficult today because it requires nothing less than dying to ourselves so that Christ may live in us. This means that we suffer, for there is no Catholicism without the cross.
- Yet we must not be discouraged, even when those we love turn away from us because of our adherence to our Catholic faith. We must not be discouraged even when we have to suffer for our faith, as did poor Jeremiah in our first reading.
- For as Jesus told His disciples during His sermon on the mount: "Blessed are you when they insult you, and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in Heaven" (Mt 5:12).
- Brethren, none of us likes to be at odds with others. None of us likes to suffer the pains of division or persecution, especially with loved ones. Certainly, we should never seek division with others, but being true disciples of Christ may necessitate it.
- Our readings today ask us the question if we are willing to suffer division for our faith. For the sake of souls, let us resolve to suffer whatever divisions necessary in this life so that we may not suffer eternal division from Christ in the next.