

*If life is a bowl of cherries, then what am I doing in the pits?* Emma Bombeck

The Bible is not meant to be read as simply a history book. It's more along the line of poetry, saga, drama – dealing with real people and real events but with a certain freedom to describe things and people by way of an image – as when Isaiah says to God, *We are the clay and you our potter.* Or when Jesus says, *I am the bread of life* or as with: *Judah is a lion's whelp . . . He couches, he lies down as a lion . . . who dares rouse him up?* Or *The Lord is my rock, my fortress . . .* Every time such images are used they bring out in whatever or whomever they refer to qualities or deeper meanings that we might otherwise miss, indeed that we might share.

In today's second reading the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* describes our spiritual life as a race that requires endurance, competition, concentration . . . a readiness to shed one's blood. So right away I shy away from that metaphor. Why? Because as a freshman in high school I naively chose to represent my class (along with other classmates) in an intramural track meet. First time in my life – I was thirteen.

I chose to run in the mile (which meant four laps around the track that encircled a football field). I lined up. At the signal I went off like a shot, outpaced all my other contenders until I reached the first turn of the first lap. There I began to wonder how come I was in first place so easily, figured I must be really fast. I also began to breathe a bit harder while my competitors all began to pass me. By half way around the first of the four laps I had to stagger onto the nearby grass and lie down – exhausted. I had no idea how far a mile was or that only by pacing oneself could one reach the finish line. I never even attended track meets after that – so, sorry St. Paul, you'll have to try some other metaphor of life to engage rather than divert my attention.

But another image is readily available this Sunday – the image of Jeremiah being lowered into a cistern (empty, thank God, but muddy). I can identify with that experience, not literally but in terms of – as they say – being in the pits. At my age there has been many a descent into despondency in the course of my life – be it between jobs or the loss of a son or a mental block or resentment over a past education that lowered my enthusiasm instead of exciting me – the wasted time, my moments of stupidity. I can identify with Jeremiah. But somehow an Ebed-Melech always came out of nowhere (like Fr. Stanislas Lyonnet in Rome) and lifted me *out of my cistern before I should die.*

Yes Jeremiah's experience of life works for me – so that whenever despondency dares to swallow me up again – I look for someone, something unanticipated (like Jeremiah's Ethiopian rescuer) to appear again – ever so kindly, gently – and say: *Put these old, tattered rags between your armpits and the ropes.*

Thereby allowing me also to be eligible to make today's Psalm my own:

*I have waited, waited for the Lord, and he stooped toward me. / The Lord heard my cry. / He drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp; / he set my feet upon a crag; he made firm my steps. / And he put a new song into my mouth . . .*