

44 Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C August 18, 2019
Jeremiah 38:1-2,4-6,8-10 Psalm 40 Hebrews 12:1-4 Luke 12:49-53

In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus say these unexpected words: *"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"* These are troubling words to hear coming from Jesus! We wouldn't expect Jesus to use words like fire and division.

This Gospel shows us another side of Jesus, not the peaceful Shepherd but the Christ of fire and flame. When Jesus says He came to a light a fire on the earth, He did not mean that He came to start forest fires, or wild fires. This fire is the fire of conviction, of commitment to follow Him.

This is an unsettling Gospel reading because the picture of the Prince of Peace bringing discord and division is different from what we would expect. It sounds shocking to us that faith in Christ should separate parents from children and split families and communities apart. These words of Christ describe the very real experience of the first Catholics, and this experience is happening today.

The division Jesus speaks of refers to those people who oppose God, and how those who oppose God will be separated from His kingdom. Jesus is gentle, but this does not mean that He is weak. When the occasion demands it, He can be very forceful, as when He drives the money changers out of the temple.

Only after Jesus' Baptism will the fire be set. He is speaking of the baptism represented by His passion, death and resurrection. The time is coming, Jesus says, when you will need to make a choice, and that choice will be the cause of much division. It will be like a sword splitting families or communities in two.

These words, fire and division, stand for something very strong in Jesus' teaching. Not unexpectedly, His teaching sometimes does cause division. Jesus does not come to intentionally cause trouble or to break up families or communities. But sometimes this happens. In the early days of the Church, conversion to Catholicism often led to rejection by one's family and friends and, therefore, the convert had to make a choice between Christ and his or her family and friends.

The early Catholics had to face some very tough issues: why Gentiles could inherit the promises made to the Jews; why the rich members of the community had special responsibility to the poor; why forgiveness was the centre of the Catholic life; what leadership role women should have in the early Church; and those who may not have agreed with the Word of God. We know that fights over these issues, as well as believing in Jesus as the Messiah, divided not only families but also villages, cities, nations, and religious tradition.

Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God is open to everyone, saints and sinners, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor. This teaching brought Him into great conflict with the religious establishment of His day. He even went as far as to call some of the Scribes and Pharisees hypocrites and blind guides. And in return, they called Jesus a troublemaker and a man possessed. The Gospels are stark reminders of the difficult costs that are sometimes involved in following in the footsteps of Jesus.

If Jesus had chosen to flatter people and say only *nice* things to them, He could have made Himself popular. Rather, Jesus chooses to disturb people because they *need* to be disturbed. Jesus comes to comfort the afflicted who are the sinners, the poor, and the unwanted and to afflict the comfortable. He comes to ruffle feathers. His words shock some and infuriate others. The fire of Jesus' message will always be a transformation to the faithful who accept Him and a rejection to those without faith.

The words Jesus speaks to the poor are different from those He speaks to the rich. The words He speaks to sinners are different from those He speaks to the Pharisees. We betray the Gospel if we reduce it to a bland message to all. There is a tendency to reduce the Gospel to pretty words and feel-good experiences. When that happens, the fire has gone out, the leaven has lost its power, the salt has lost its taste, and the light of Christ has dimmed.

Jesus says He comes to kindle a fire upon the earth. This is only an image, a metaphor. *But it is a powerful one.* It is a symbol of judgment and purification. Fire burns up what is useless, and refines what is impure. The Gospel message is a fire that purifies; it is the leaven of our community and the world. A fire needs not only to be kindled but also tended, and we, the followers of Jesus, are the ones responsible for tending that fire.

This brings us to the 21st century, to our present moment today. There are also many tough issues in our Church today that are bringing division: abortion, same-sex marriage, ordination of women, wars, forgiveness and injustice, to name a few. Despite the division among people and within families now and throughout the past centuries, Jesus' fire still burns brightly in the hearts of faithful Catholics. When we look at the candles on the altar, we are reminded of the fire of Jesus' love enkindled in our hearts that Jesus keeps lit for all of us.

We can join the fire of Jesus by educating our children in the knowledge of Jesus Christ and by speaking the Gospel truth to the people with whom we live and work. We can join our fire to Jesus by insisting on honesty and fairness in business, politics and government. We can join our fire to Jesus to restore a moral conscience to our nation whether we oppose the evil of abortion, the corrosion of sexual license, death to our elderly.

As well, we add fuel to our fire by attending Sunday Mass, and weekly Mass if possible, to receive the Holy Eucharist to sustain and strengthen our Catholic commitment to Christ. We can keep the fuel of our fire pure by going to Confession regularly. We can add fuel to our faith through a volunteer ministry, an apostolate, an advocate for social justice, a mission of some kind.

Because the values of our society are confused, ours do not have to be. Because our culture is morally adrift, we do not have to be. Because people are indifferent to the dignity of human life, we do not have to be. Because people are casual about loyalties and commitments, we do not have to be.

The fire of faith gives our life direction but that fire must be fueled and fed. So many times we are struck by temporary enthusiasm that sputters out like a match. How do we fuel the fire of our faith and our conviction? We can keep the fire of Jesus burning in our hearts by developing a relationship with Christ through prayer and faithfulness to His teaching and His Church.

As we continue our Eucharistic celebration, let's take a look at where you think the fire of faith in our family and community may be dying and how you can help to rekindle that fire. Look for the sounds of pain, loneliness, abandonment or hurt and how

you can bring the fire of Christ to those areas. Let the fire of your own faith in Christ, and your own conviction about our Lord, illuminate your life and light the way for others.

As fire shines in the dark and gives light in all directions, so let us bring that sacred fire of the love of Christ wherever we go, and to whomever we meet. Jesus is asking that of each one of us today. We are all followers of Christ so let us lift high the fire of our faith in Christ to attract and encourage people who are in darkness, to see our fire and to feel a desire to follow our faith in Jesus with us.