

Luke 12:49-53, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C, August 17th & 18th, 2019

Our readings today are filled with all kinds of conflict and division. In our First Reading we have Jeremiah, God's Prophet, being thrown down into a cistern and being left there to die. And in our Gospel we have Jesus proclaiming what seems to be a very disturbing message; one that speaks of Him casting a fire on the earth, being anguished about a baptism that He must undergo, and finally that He has not come to bring peace but division; division that cuts through even close-knit families. Our readings today raise a number of questions that I think we need to try to understand in order to hear what the Church wants to tell us today. Questions like: What is this fire that Jesus is going to start on the earth? What is this baptism that he must endure, that is causing him such anguish? Finally, what are we to make of all the conflict and division He is speaking about, conflict that will go even to the heart of families? I mean Jesus is the "Prince of Peace" right? How do we reconcile this truth of the faith with this Gospel?

I believe the key we need to unlock these questions is found in the first sentence of the Gospel, where Jesus tells us, "He has come to cast fire on the earth...". Well, our faith actually teaches us a lot about why Jesus came to the earth, about why the Son of God became man, what we call the "Incarnation", so somehow this fire Jesus speaks of is related to His mission, his purpose for descending into our midst. Since many of you are heading back to school this week, and in the spirit of starting a new year, it is always a good idea to go back to the basics, so let's look at some of the fundamental beliefs of our faith to help us answer our questions. If we go to the Catechism, paragraphs 456 through 460, we find four reasons for "Why the Word become Flesh?". Now, I am only going to talk about two of them, because I think they really help us with today's Gospel, but you are more than welcome to go and look up the other two for extra credit this week!

The first reason from the Catechism for the Son of God to come to the earth was **to save us by reconciling us with the Father**. What this means is that we needed to be saved. We as human beings have a problem. We have a fallen nature that we inherited from our first parents, who originally lived in friendship and harmony with God, but who let their trust in their creator “die in their heart”, and through their free choice, disobeyed God’s command and broke that relationship. This is what we call the Doctrine of Original Sin. It is very interesting to me that I have heard people who say that this is such an awful teaching and is so degrading toward humanity that it couldn’t possibly be true. It is quite unfortunate, but, at least to me, it is stunningly obvious that this teaching has the most empirical evidence to support it. All you have to do is look around at the world we live in and see the terrible things human beings do to each other on a horribly regular basis. We are a broken race, a wounded race, a race that is enslaved to sin and oppressed by the finality and certainty of death. This is the “Bad News”. This is what the world was like before Jesus entered into it, and this is what the world would be like if Jesus were absent from it.

Jesus is the Son of God made man; the Word made flesh. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, that is His title and His mission. Through his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, what we call the “Paschal Mystery”, Jesus Redeems us. He pays our debt. He stands, innocent, in our place where He is accused and tortured. He hangs on the Cross for each of us, as if we were the only ones in the world. The sinless one for the sinner, giving up His Body and pouring out His Blood. This is the baptism that He must endure to pay the debt that we cannot pay. This is the baptism that He is anguishing over in today’s Gospel. This is the baptism where He will die for our sins, but on the third day will rise to new life. Such that now justice and mercy are satisfied, and the bonds of sin and death that once enslaved us are

broken, and we are once again restored to right relationship with the Father. This is the “Good News of the Gospel!”

The Catechism goes on to tell us that the fulfillment of what we have just identified as Jesus’ “baptism”; His Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, occurs Fifty days after His Resurrection when the Holy Spirit was manifested, given, and communicated as a divine person to the Church on that first Pentecost. And how was the Holy Spirit made manifest? We read in Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles, “And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” My friends, I believe along with St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who said, that the fire that Jesus is speaking about in today’s Gospel is the fire of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, the personification of the eternal exchange of love between the Father and the Son, is what is poured out as tongues of fire on the disciples gathered for that first Pentecost. It is this fire of the Holy Spirit that ignited the hearts of the early Christians to go out into a hostile world to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ risen from the dead. The Good News of God’s love for His people.

The second reason the Catechism gives us about why the Word became flesh is that **Jesus came to be our model of holiness.** Jesus tells us He is the “Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father, but by me.” Jesus came to show us the Way to live so that we may find our “Way” home to the Father. He teaches us a different “Way” than the way of the world. He teaches us we need to be “poor in spirit” if we are to inherit the kingdom; that we are blessed when we mourn, when we have compassion for others; that it is good for us to be meek and humble; that we should hunger and thirst for righteousness; that we should be merciful, and pure of heart, and peacemakers. In other words, Jesus is teaching us that we need to be like Him.

Jesus is the Truth and he calls on us to live in that Truth. We often hear today the idea that, “You have your truth and I have my truth.” That concept vaporizes when exposed to the searing light that is the Son of the living God. There is no moral relativism with Jesus. He tells us He didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Make no mistake, in Christ, there is right and wrong, there is good and evil, light and darkness, and Jesus tells us the way to the Father is to walk in the light. Jesus also teaches us the Truth about the Father, that He is a Father who stands and watches, not watching and waiting to punish us when we mess up, which we all do, but watching and waiting to run and embrace us when we finally repent and turn back to Him. God is Justice; God is Mercy; God is love.

Jesus is the Life. Jesus came to show us how to live in a new and radical way. In a world where sin abounded and the strong dominated the weak, He taught that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for a friend. He taught that we should love one another as He loves us, and that is a great and terrible thing when we see how He loved us on the Cross. He taught us the law of the Kingdom of God, the way of self-giving, sacrificial, love; and if we followed this “Way” of love we would experience a new kind of life, a life full of meaning and purpose, a life of abundance. And He called men and women to follow him, to enter into this new life, to learn His ways, to become His disciples. It is very important to note that Jesus calls us to follow Him. He doesn’t force us or coerce us. He invites us into a relationship with Him. He deeply desires for us to freely choose to follow Him, to freely choose to love Him, because our love cannot be forced it must be freely given. It is important to note that yes, at baptism we received the Holy Spirit, original sin was removed, we received the sacramental grace to aid us in the Christian life, and we became members of the family of God. But the sacraments are not magic, they don’t force us to become disciples. Each of us, at some point in our lives, has to make an adult decision to either follow Christ or not.

I believe that it is this free choice, that is the source of the division and conflict that our Lord is speaking about in the Gospel today. This conflict doesn't start out in our families, but it begins in each of our hearts. This choice that Jesus impels from us can be disturbing and troubling, because He asks for so much. He doesn't just want a part of us, He wants all of us. Jesus didn't come to die on the Cross so that we would be lukewarm Catholics. He wants to be the Lord of our life, and that can be a very scary thing. The trouble is we still suffer the effects of our first parent's sin; we still find it very, very hard to trust God with our hearts. We think things like, "Does He really want what is best for me?", or "How could He love me after what I have done?", or "If I give him my life, what is He going to ask me to do?"

If we do somehow manage, with God's grace, to work through these challenges and begin a life of discipleship in Jesus Christ, we will change. His priorities will start to become our priorities. Those things that entertained us and were so important to us before encountering Christ no longer hold the same fascination. Other things that may not have been so important to us previously, things like being present at Mass, going to confession regularly, or spending time in prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament suddenly become vital parts of our lives, and this can be very disturbing and even threatening to those close to us, who may not understand why our lives are changing and theirs are not.

The Christian message has both inspired and divided men and women for the past Two thousand years, so it shouldn't surprise us that it continues to divide us today. It also doesn't mean that we should give up or be discouraged because we encounter conflict because of our faith. In fact, Jesus is telling us we should expect it. Jesus never stops His mission of calling men and women to a life of holiness and purpose and peace, and it is our great privilege to share in that mission. He came to cast a fire upon the earth and how He wishes it were already blazing.