

20TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, C

“Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division” (Luke 12: 51)

Could this be true? If we take the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel (Lk. 12: 49-53) literally, we may begin to think that what Jesus said about “fire”, “blazing” and “division” is all true or is coming through. For all we see today are division, violence, war, intolerance, discrimination, blazing anger, and fiery furnaces of threats. We see the family structure under threats, marriages breaking up on daily basis, brothers not seeing eye-to-eye, sisters at war, mother in-law and father in-law against daughter and son in-law, hatred seems to order human actions instead of love and peace. Taken at its face value, this statement presents us with an unfamiliar image of Jesus. Here He sounds hard and harsh. So, where is the comforting, compassionate, loving, caring and peaceful Jesus? To find Him, we must look critically at the entire scenario and the deeper meaning of this statement.

The Context: Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, the Holy City. According to Luke’s Gospel, this was the only journey He made to Jerusalem since the beginning of His ministry. He would go there once and never return. There, He knew what was awaiting Him – the Cross, with its sufferings, pains, and nails. This was always before Him. He never lost sight of it. At this time, He had to remind His disciples and those following Him of His anguish and the blazing desire for Him to save us all. Jeremiah’s suffering in the First Reading (Jer. 38: 4-6, 8-10) was a foreshadow of the imminent suffering of Christ, the Messiah. For, like Jeremiah, Jesus would be persecuted, rejected by His own people, betrayed, and abandoned. The well was like Christ’s Cross, and as Christ would be raised from the dead, Jeremiah was rescued and not let to die in the waterless well. The suffering of Jeremiah and Jesus reflects our sufferings in the life. Their deliverance shows God’s presence in amidst our sufferings. He never leaves us. Though it may be long, though we be left to suffer for some time, God will deliver us at His time. Be patient. Stay faithful. And the Lord’s day will come.

The Fire: Jesus said: “I have come to bring fire on earth, and how I wish it were blazing already.” In Jewish eschatology, “fire” had always referred to “the last judgement of God.” It was widely taught and believed that God had first destroyed the world with water at the time of Noah and had made a covenant

with him never to destroy the world again with water. Therefore, because of that, when God will destroy the world the second time, it will be with fire. Here therefore, Jesus is using a familiar image to communicate an eternal truth. This fire is the fire of love. Not our love, but His love. His love is self-sacrificing. He loves us by giving Himself totally for us to have life and live. This is the fire He expected to be burning already, the fire of loving one another as He has loved us. For some others, especially the Fathers of the Church, St. Cyril of Jerusalem in particular, explain this “fire” as referring to the blazing fire of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day (Acts 2:3). With this explanation, it is understandable why Jesus would wish that the “fire” was “blazing already.” The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the unction that the apostles, disciples, and believers would need to light up the world with the Good News to inaugurate and sustain the Kingdom He, Jesus came to establish. This is what St. Ignatius of Loyola had in mind when he said to departing missionaries: “Go, set the world on fire!”

Division, Not Peace: Jesus said: “Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division”: This, again, is weird coming from Jesus. But what is Jesus saying here? First, He is quoting from the Old Testament prophecy of Micah (7: 6-7). The Book of Micah 7 is the prophecy of the coming age of salvation and return of the scattered ten tribes of Israel, which however would be preceded by great tribulation that would divide not just the peoples but would cause severe rift in the families. The prophet said: “For son insults father, daughter defies mother, daughter in-law defies mother in-law; a man’s enemies are those of his own household” (Micah 7: 6). Here Jesus is saying that He brings salvation; He comes with peace but before we experience these, our choices would cause division, even in households. For some will accept my offer and many will not. In a household of five, three may say “Yes” to me, and two refuse the offer. The message of Christ, like His person and Cross is a sign of contradiction. A disciple therefore is one who makes this fundamental choice not minding the results. Remember when He once told us: *“Anyone who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me. Anyone who prefers son or daughter to me is not worthy of me. Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it; and anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it”* (Matt. 10: 37-39). It is in our choices that these divisions will manifest and from these choices and division will the peace and the kingdom be realised.

My dear friends, gospel speaks of the willingness of Jesus to live out the will of the Father. It was a burning desire in Him. He was aware of His purpose on earth

and every one of His word and action was aimed at achieving that. This is our challenge – to be willing to do the will of God, to be willing to love as He loves us; lose our life for His sake; and to take up our cross every day and follow Him; love Him more and love less our very own. The choice must be radical and the decision final. May his grace be sufficient for us all.