

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time August 14, 2016

Jer. 38:1-2, 4-6, 8-10; Heb. 12:1-4; Luke. 12:49-53

Jesus during his public ministry announced that he has come to establish the Kingdom of God and told people that it is here and now. Jesus invited every person to be part of this Kingdom, to be signs of unity and harmony in him. The Church is the external expression of the Kingdom. It needs a deep insight and grace to accept his invitation of Jesus. The recognition and faith bring us closer to Jesus and to his Eucharistic banquet. Christ revealed his desire to give his life for us and describes it as a "baptism"; for he will rise victorious over sin and death and will never die again. In our baptism, we are submerged into his death and by it we die to sin and are reborn to a life of grace. In our Christian lives, we have to accept what is spiritual and pleasing to God, rejecting what is sinful and offensive to Him. Christ wants his burning love to catch in us so we have the same passion and zeal for the Gospel and for the will of God that he did. He wants his message to reach all men and we are his messengers. The Readings of today invite us to consider the struggle and difficulty inherent in being a Christian. The path of following Christ is one of contradiction and difficulty in every time and place, and if we aren't living with that tension, it is perhaps because we are living without complete authenticity as a follower of Christ. Following Christ should cost us all something dear. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of the division and struggle that will come as a result of his preaching and mission, and the difficulties his followers will face. His mission is not to smooth over differences but to call us to real holiness and to the fullness of the truth.

The passage from the prophet Jeremiah in our first reading gives a glimpse of his sufferings in the days before Jerusalem was conquered. God had given him a message for the king that was sadly disregarded and tragedy would follow with the fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent deportation of the Israelites to Babylon for two generations. Jeremiah, like many of the prophets of the Old Testament, was frequently persecuted during his lifetime. Those persons of authority did not appreciate hearing the Word of God that was being prophesied through the mouth of Jeremiah. While it cannot be denied that Jeremiah was delivering bad news, such was being done in obedience and servitude to God. Being human as we are, he did not appreciate it and he often feared for his life. Caught between fearing God and the obligation to serve Him versus wanting to run away from the calling of a prophet, Jeremiah continuously resisted his human nature by submitting himself to God in full obedience. In truth, it was not Jeremiah who was speaking

but rather it was God who was speaking through Jeremiah. As such, when the king and his officials rejected what they heard. They did not reject Jeremiah, they were rejecting God Himself. When they mistreated Jeremiah by throwing him in the cistern of Malchiah, their actions were directed towards God. The Prophet served God until the end.

Our second reading today taken from the letter to the Hebrews hints at the type of 'fire' that Jesus hopes to ignite on the earth. The Letter reminds the early Christians of what an authentic Christian life consists in, and that even Jesus had to endure opposition and suffering to be faithful to the will of his heavenly Father. The author of this letter reminds the community not to lose sight of Jesus, to remain steadfast and not to become discouraged in their commitments to his teaching, promising that through faithfulness divine reward will be granted. This passage is clearly encouraging the new converts to reject their previous way of life in favour of a life in Christ. The author is admonishing to throw off everything that hinders them, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race they have started to participate. Thus the fire that Jesus speaks of in today's gospel is surely a purgation of those things that hinder us, a removal of the sin which keeps us from living more deeply in the knowledge and wisdom of God. This fire is energy to move and inspire the life of the Christian community and thus can be interpreted as fidelity to the Spirit of Christ which descended upon his followers at Pentecost. Therefore, they must persevere and run the race that is set before them looking to Jesus as the pioneer and as one who perfects our faith.

In today's gospel, Jesus the prince of peace invites his disciples, to a holy war against sin and evil forces. The message of Jesus is non-violent. It brings love, compassion, harmony, peace. It brings people together so that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female... But it also of its nature challenges injustice, corruption, discrimination, abuse, dishonesty and all attacks on human dignity. The saying that Jesus has come to set the earth on fire, and bring division instead of peace, has been understood in several ways by Christians and non-Christians. Fire is the sign of purification. John had promised that Jesus would baptise with Holy Spirit and fire. Fire is symbolic of the Holy Spirit and His actions of being a consuming fire as God. The ministry of Jesus on earth included preparing the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to guide and teach us in all the truth, to sanctify us and to test our faith by fire. While some see this statement as a paradox which not be taken literally, others see it as the advocating of violence by Jesus.

In the Old Testament Yahweh is associated time and time again with fire as He represents Himself to Moses in the Book of Exodus in the form of a burning bush, or as a scorching fire of judgment against the transgressions of the people of Israel in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. And so, Jesus' fire must somehow represent the revelation of God as well as a tool of God's punishment for those who are unfaithful. And yet, as we understand by both faith and tradition, Jesus is a deeper and fuller revelation of the mystery of God and, subsequently, his 'fire' must enlighten some new aspect of faith than those revealed in the Old Testament.

The Spirit of Jesus is given to all freely who choose to follow him through baptism. This is a fire planted within us to guide us, to direct us, and to admonish us when we deviate from the path; a living flame which, throughout our lives, purges us of that which may hold us back from unity with God. In this sense, the fire of Jesus that lives in each of us helps to mould us and shape us into what we are meant to become, a heat which warms our hearts encouraging us to continue the work of Jesus today. Through Jesus this fire is given to us to maintain and is thus no longer the sole possession of the God of the universe, the God of the Old Testament. God lives within the disciples of Jesus giving us the power to be more than the facility of our humanity could ever allow us to be without God. For those of us that live by faith we have countless stories to tell about how that fire has kept our spirits warm, called us away from the selfishness of sin, evoked us into service of others, and revealed to us the beautiful plan of God for our world. We cherish this fire because, in the words of St. Paul, it is Jesus "who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection".

Our Lord came into the world as a person of peace. He came to a world which prefers darkness to light, a world that is inhabited by people who prefer lies to truth. It is a world in which good and bad inhabit together; where those who call themselves the children of God lord it over others; where injustice and oppression are compromised by political and religious leaders. The process of sanctifying the world through the institution of the invisible Kingdom of God on earth that is seen through the visible Body of Christ is one that creates division. Household will be divided, three against two and two against three. It is because some will resist the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit, choosing worldly fame, the pleasures of the flesh and wealth. Some will choose to walk in the light while others will prefer to walk through "the darkest valley." The Christian's resistance against sin, all that is evil, is an on-going inner battle. Sharing his thoughts on this inner conflict, Saint Paul said, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

When Jesus came into this world, he was not welcome (John 1:12) because he taught a new way of living and looking at the world which involved turning away from sin and selfishness, and living for God. This way of life taught by Jesus does not come easy without cost. It involves rejecting many of the values that our society holds dear but is opposed to God. This way of living, Jesus warns his disciples, will result in being rejected by others, including close friends and even family members. When Jesus said he has not come to bring peace, he is referring to the peace that was invoked then in his time; the peace that was the product of war and compromise; where injustice and oppression prevailed. As a matter of fact, Jesus is not opposed to peace. Instead Jesus is the prince of peace; he came to establish peace that comes from forgiveness. This is the kind he wished his disciples when he told them: Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27).

On the other hand, when he said that he had come to bring division, he was talking about the division that his message would bring between those who accept it and those who reject it; between the righteous and unrighteous. As a result of this division: “Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death,” By this he indicates that the message would divide families between those who would accept the message and those who would reject it. Rather than advocating violence, Jesus was warning his disciples that they would encounter violence from those unwilling to accept the Truth. The interpretation that the truth will cause division between those who accept it and those who do not is reflected in the gospel of John: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all those received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:10-13).

Therefore, the holy war to which Christ calls us, is not a war against people of certain nationalities or cultures, creeds or ideologies, but a war in which we first have to identify the forces for evil in our own persons and in the persons of those who are dear to us (father, son, mother, daughter, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law) and then declare an uncompromising war against these forces. In so doing, Jesus redefines family as those who follow the same divine purpose and no longer those who share the same name or address. The challenge before us today is to take the side of Christ, and be men and women of principle, even if doing so will divide us from our kith and kin, our father or mother, our brother or sister, our brother-in-law or sister-in-law, our townsmen or our tribesmen. This is what Jesus meant when he said: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with

me scatters". As disciples our commitment is to follow Jesus and to enter fully into his struggle to repair the world, and to restore ourselves and others to right relationships. The cost of this for some will mean changing their work or losing their job. For others, it will mean challenging or even changing their personal relationships, or travelling more lightly, or blooming more fully right where they are planted.

So until Jesus comes again to definitively and universally establish the reign and peace of God, the spectre of division will confront those who follow him. Faced with this abiding challenge, it is put upon the community of faith to struggle with the paradox that those who work for God's peace will also be the occasion of conflict and division. It devolves to us today as members of Christ's Body to examine the level of comfort or challenge with which we bear witness toward each other and the world. If our individual and communal living and working in the spirit of Christ sparks no fire, and causes no division within our own ranks and especially with the wider city and culture, then we, too, may have become a perfect model of lukewarm and inoffensive Christianity.

Every Christian needs to recommit himself to the path of following Christ, "keeping our eyes fixed on him", since he is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." There is no salvation in any other name. Jesus teaches the full truth about God and about man, and though at times it is hard for us to accept, we must pray for the grace to grasp his truth and for the courage to hold on to it no matter what. The example of those Christians who are suffering for the truth in so many places around the world, such as China and the Middle East, should inspire us to give witness in our daily lives. We live in a free society, but one in which it is easy to give in and compromise our faith out of fear of what others might say or think. We need to pray for the strength not to waver in the truth. By our fidelity, our humility, and above all, our charity towards all, we can win over many souls to the truth. Religion should never divide but is only a false Christianity and religion that deliberately creates division. True Christianity in defending truth, justice, human dignity and freedom will inevitably meet opposition and be attacked. The passage which says that the peacemakers are blessed also says that those who are persecuted in the name of the Gospel are equally blessed. Strangely enough, both go together.

It happened several years ago in the Paris opera house. A famous singer had been contracted to sing, and ticket sales were booming. In fact, the night of the concert found the house packed and every ticket sold. The feeling of anticipation and excitement was in the air as the house manager took the stage and said, Ladies and

gentlemen, thank you for your enthusiastic support. I am afraid that due to illness, the man whom you've all come to hear will not be performing tonight. However, we have found a suitable substitute we hope will provide you with comparable entertainment. The crowd groaned in disappointment and failed to hear the announcer mention the stand-in's name. The environment turned from excitement to frustration. The stand-in performer gave the performance everything he had. When he had finished, there was nothing but an uncomfortable silence. No one applauded. Suddenly, from the balcony, a little boy stood up and shouted, Daddy, I think you are wonderful! The crowd broke into thunderous applause. We all need people in our Lives who are willing to stand up once in a while and say, I think you are wonderful.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India