

20th Week in Ordinary Time (Cycle C)

Today's Gospel reading from Luke is disturbing. It's disturbing, I think, because it develops two themes we'd prefer not to associate with Jesus.

- The first is fire. Jesus tells his disciples that he has come "*to set the earth on fire.*" Yes, this reference to fire is disturbing because we tend to associate fire with destruction, and we'd prefer not to associate Jesus with destruction.
- The second theme is conflict, conflict between and among family members. We associate conflict with destruction as well, don't we? As far too many of us know, unhealthy conflict can destroy a family. And, again, this theme is disturbing because we'd prefer not to associate Jesus with destruction.

So what should we make of today's Gospel reading? How should we understand it?

Let's take each of these two themes in turn: first, fire and, then, conflict.

Yes, fire can destroy, but there's more to fire than destruction, isn't there?

- Think of steel. Steel is a product of fire. Impurities are burned away in the refining process so that something stronger can emerge.
- Similarly, think of forest fires. Yes, a forest fire can be destructive. At the same time, however, new growth – healthy growth – can only emerge after years of decay have been cleared away by fire.
- And, yes, think of cooking. Whether you're roasting, baking, or grilling, cooking requires heat, and heat requires fire. No cooking, no food... No food, no life...

Yes, fire can be destructive. But there's more to fire than destruction. Fire can also refine, clear away that which is unhealthy, and sustain life.

So how about our second theme? How should we understand Jesus' reference to conflict in today's Gospel reading?

Well, here's one approach. It's an approach that's sometimes used in interpreting violence in the Old Testament, most notably in our reading of the Psalms. Scripture scholars tell us that external conflict with others is often employed in Scripture as a metaphor for internal conflict. More often than not, our conflicts aren't with others. More often than not, some of our most troubling conflicts lie within.

This, in fact, is reflected in our everyday language. Think of the expressions:

- "I'm of two minds on this."
- "I feel very strongly both ways."

- Or how about his one? “He doesn’t know whether he’s coming or going.”

Internal conflict...

In fact, Jesus encountered this kind of conflict throughout his public ministry.

- Nicodemus was clearly drawn to Jesus, but couldn’t accept the idea of being born again. He was conflicted.
- Peter declared Jesus to be the Son of the Living God, but then denied him three times.
- And Judas... Judas was deeply conflicted as well, so violently so, in fact, that his struggle turned inward. It consumed him.

So is this what today’s Gospel reading means when it refers to fire and conflict? Does this understanding make sense? Perhaps so, especially when we look ahead to the end of the story.

Yes, let’s jump ahead to the very end of Luke’s Gospel where we learn about Jesus’ appearance on the Road to Emmaus. Let’s set the scene.

- Jesus has been brutally murdered.
- His disciples are terrified. They think they’re next, and so they’re running away from Jerusalem as fast as they can.
- And so we find Cleopas and a fellow disciple high-tailing it to Emmaus.
- And along the way, they encounter a stranger, a stranger who explains Jesus and his mission to them.
- As they near an inn, the two disciples ask the stranger to stay with them, but for a bit. Yes, but for a bit...
- And finally, they recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

Cleopas and his fellow disciple were deeply conflicted. Jesus had meant everything to them, but we find them, nonetheless, fleeing from Jesus as fast as they can.

- They were of two minds.
- They felt very strongly both ways.
- Indeed, they didn’t know whether they were coming or going.

Conflict... Their experience of Jesus had engendered internal conflict in their minds.

And how about fire? Listen to the words of the two disciples: *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?”*

Fire... Fire that refines... Fire that clears away unhealthy growth... Fire that sustains life... The two disciples’ hearts were on fire.

- The good news for us? Jesus chases after us, just as he did the two disciples who were fleeing to Emmaus.
- The good news for us? We, too, can experience Jesus in the opening of the Scriptures and in the breaking of the bread.
- The good news for us? Our hearts, too, can be set on fire, if only we but ask Jesus to stay with us, but for a bit.