

20th Sunday Of Ordinary Time – 2022C

Today's Gospel passage is a difficult text to approach because it offers a view of Jesus that preachers seldom discuss. This is a **divisive** Jesus, who says that he came "to bring fire to the earth" (v. 49). To fully appreciate the full impact of this text we must look at verses 54 and 55 which are not included in today's Gospel reading. In these verses Jesus shames the crowd as hypocrites. He says that they can detect a wind from the south and predict scorching heat, but they cannot detect which way the wind is blowing when they look upon the signs of the times. They're hypocrites. He didn't want followers who tagged along for a meal and a few pieces of wisdom; he wanted disciples to walk next to him on the hard road to Jerusalem and beyond. Not merely people to "do" the ritual and say that's good enough, but those willing to embrace him, his Way, and his fate.

Jesus is divisive. He himself said that he did not come to bring peace. "No, I tell you, but rather division" (v. 51). He goes on to say that the division will separate "father against son ... mother against daughter ..." and in-laws against each other (v. 53). And if this is possible, it's no wonder that in the wider church body, such division should also exist. This is sobering, and the takeaway for all of us is this: **Who does Jesus think I am?** A hypocrite — just one of the crowd he faced that day? Or the real deal — someone already bending over to pick up the cross in self-denial and follow him all the way to Calvary?

While preparing this homily I was forced to do some serious reflection. During one period of reflection, I thought about a book that I read several years ago, written by a Jesuit priest, whom I'll call Fr. Jim because I can't recall his name. In it he tells a story about a close friend, also a Jesuit priest, and himself. Fr. Jim was assigned to work in the U.S.A. while his friend was sent to the far East. They stayed in touch with each other and even exchanged Christmas gifts. One year Fr. Jim decided to ask his friend what he would really like for Christmas. His friend wrote back saying that he loved blue cheese but hadn't been able to eat any since leaving the States. Apparently blue cheese was not available where he was assigned because it would quickly go bad. "I would love some blue cheese as a gift" he said.

Fr. Jim was faced with a dilemma. Would he go out and buy the blue cheese and send it to his friend knowing that would go bad or would he play it safe and purchase something else he knew his friend could use. Using this story as an example Fr. Jim pointed out that each of us is faced with the same dilemma when it comes to being a true disciple of Jesus. Will I choose to do God's work, that is, accepting to do what seems to be difficult, impossible, dangerous, or even outrageous or am I going to play it safe and do something I think God will like? Doing God's work or working for God? I've had to ask myself this question and I'm not sure that I have always chosen to do God's work. I would venture to say that it is a question

each and every one of us must ponder in light of this Gospel passage.

Jesus once used a metaphor we **don't** hear today that's good to keep in mind when we hear this passage proclaimed. It's the one about how new wine just doesn't fit in old wine skins. When the new wine expands, the old stretched-out skins will burst, and there goes the wine. In order to contain new wine, you have to use fresh skins. Don't kid yourself that old ones will do fine, because it's a waste of time and effort and, for heaven's sake, wine!

The kingdom of God, the central teaching of Jesus' ministry, is a new world coming. It's a new way of being, a new way of living, seeing, acting, deciding, and valuing. It is, in other words, new wine, and because new ideas are rarely compatible with old ones, the old ones have to give way. A lot of us, though, especially those of us who've been around a while, have become pretty comfortable in the old way of being. I myself have difficulty accepting new technology, fashions, and cultural innovation every time something is introduced. I find myself hating revolutions at first contact: everything from computers, to the latest cell phones, to automated telephone messages, to hot pink hair! It's unsettling! It's not the way life used to be and is supposed to be! But eventually these brand-new things start to grow their own familiarity and I let them into my life. I have the computer and new cell phone even though both irritate me from to time. I can live with automated telephone

messages but I still don't like them. Maybe I'll even come to appreciate hot pink hair!

When Jesus talks about bringing division, that is what he's talking about. It's not simply family members set against each other when Kingdom comes. It's **generations** that are at odds. Son against father, mother against daughter, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law: Old and new are in fierce conflict at the Kingdom's arrival. It's an intimate battle, fought in-house, setting loved ones in opposition. The new world can't slide easily into a gap left in the old one; the new world comes to tear the old world and the old way apart.

And that frightens us, as new things often do. It makes us mad. New is hard. It's often hard to understand the reasons why new is even necessary. What's wrong with doing things with pen and paper or dialing up the number on a landline phone? What's wrong with clinging to our grade-school understanding of religion? In every heart the battle for the Kingdom will be waged. Either we surrender to the new, or we'll be left behind as the new wine finds a more pliant generation to receive it.

Households continue to be divided by the gospel today. Parents may commit themselves, while children wander. One spouse embraces the way, the other is skeptical. The household of church itself is a cornucopia of passionate avowal, simple sincerity, hesitation and doubt, and half-hearted membership. We're not all on the same page. In the matter of faith above all others, free will

remains paramount. The fire is blazing. Not all will choose to be kindled by it.

But we may be moved to ask, how much should faith cost? How many sacrifices are worth making for it? We would like to tell ourselves we would do anything for our faith, even sacrificing ourselves, such as so many martyrs and other saints have done in one form or another. Would not a refusal to do so betray this cloud of sacred witnesses?

The word martyr means “witness.” Despite the many portraits of bloody countenances religious art presents to us, the impact of these lives is not really in how they died but why. Their testimony to faith in Jesus Christ was worth surrendering all they had to purchase it. And so, they joined the multitude of witnesses, to continue to say what they know.

The lives of those saints that gave themselves in sacrificial living day by day are so many pieces of evidence that the blaze Jesus set upon the earth continues to burn down the centuries. If the zeal of the Holy Spirit burns in us, then we, too, must display it where the world can benefit from its warmth and light. And we also must be prepared to face that line in the sand. We are called to emulate their zeal.