

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – August 14, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat., 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 850 words

The gospel speaks about two types of pyrotechnics: one being the fire that the Lord wishes were aflame upon the earth; and the other being the sort of blaze that arises when people are at odds with each other, when there is division. It would seem, then, that we are always to be amidst the flames. Things of value are purified by fire, and so it is with our souls: these flames in which we are immersed are meant to purify us in one way or another and prepare us, as a prelude to the cool relief that heaven – a place of refreshment – will bring.

But when we look more closely at this gospel we see that the two types of fires are really quite different. First, Christ desires that the world be set ablaze, and then refers to baptism. Here he is referring to the Holy Spirit, for whom a traditional image or symbol is fire. He wants the earth to be filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit, with the fire of God's love. Recall how the Holy Spirit appeared as tongues of fire over the apostles at Pentecost; recall also how St. John the Baptist had preached that Christ's baptism would be "with the Holy Spirit and fire". The first blaze, then, refers to the presence of God throughout the world. This is what Christ ardently desires.

But Jesus is also a realist. He knows that the fire of the Holy Spirit is often rejected by the cold-hearted, by those who have closed themselves to God's grace through their own free choice. When this happens, there is a fiery clash of powers: a clash between good and evil, between the forces of light and the power of darkness. And this painful heat even touches our closest family relationships; how many families are divided over religious questions? In how many families are there misunderstandings, resentments, even unforgiveness, because one member has embraced the Church but another has rejected her? This second fire is the spiritual struggle that arises from the fact of the first fire: from the fact that some people do follow Christ – but not all.

Our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews puts everything in more concrete terms, speaking of our spiritual battle and the perseverance that is needed. We who follow Christ and seek to be aflame with his Spirit – with his love – can so easily become worn out from the struggle. Sometimes we are just plain soft; sometimes we have lost perspective, failing to keep our eyes on the lofty heights of heaven. And so we end up discouraged and even fall away from our Lord. The reading exhorts us, however: "Consider how [Christ] endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood." The struggle is real and it is difficult, but we are not alone: together, we are following Christ on the way of the cross.

Therefore, we are to look to that "cloud of witnesses" that surrounds us – the saints, the angels, and our fellow Christians who are with us in the spiritual battle that we face in this world. And we are to persevere, with our eyes fixed on Jesus. The sacred author compares our spiritual struggle to "running a race", which Christ did "for the sake of the joy that lay before him". Maybe we are too spiritually sedentary! The world wants us to extinguish the first fire in order to avoid the second: in the end, we become cold and lifeless. Christ says, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" When we draw near to that blazing fire we get burned: we encounter difficulties, problems, and suffering. It brands us spiritually, causing us to identify with the one whom we follow, the "leader and perfecter of" our faith.

Well, a few questions will help us to apply all of these rather poetic reflections to ourselves, and profit from them. The first question: Do you have the fire? Have you been set ablaze by the Lord? In other words, are you living in the state of grace – are you right with God? The second question: Do you sometimes allow that flame to go out or to be darkened, in order to avoid that other fire of conflict, strife, discord, and difficulty that following Christ inevitably

brings? From giving in to human respect to being “politically correct”, there are a multitude of ways we can darken or extinguish the flame of God’s love in our soul. And a third question: Do you pray for perseverance in running the race? In this, we have the support of all the saints who have gone before us, and we must keep our eyes fixed on Christ, looking beyond the pains and sorrows of this life to the unspeakable joy of the next. May the fire that Christ came to cast upon this earth ever be found ablaze in us!