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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois  
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The Twentieth Sunday of the Year (C)

The Savior's words today are quite striking. They seem out of place to us, somehow as though Jesus should not be speaking them. How can the One whom those heralding angels promised would give "peace to those on whom his favor rests" say, "Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (Luke 2:14 and 12:51)?

The difficulty for us comes not so much in Jesus' words and actions, but in how we view him. We are very inclined today to focus on Jesus as a nice guy who accepts everyone and who is a tolerant man. In this view commonly held today Jesus is my friend who accepts me just as I am and does not really call me to any great change. He asks nothing great of me, nothing dramatic; he simply asks me to be his friend. If this is our notion of the King of kings and the Lord of lords then of course Jesus' words today seem foreign! This is a distorted vision of the Messiah and one that fails to take him, and sin, seriously. It is a Jesus fashioned after our own image which displays too much the societal standards of our own time.

It is, of course, true that Jesus calls us friends and receives us with open arms (cf. John 15:15). Yet we must also remember that Jesus commands us to "Repent, for the kingdom of

heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). At the same time that he receives us he commands that we change our lives and devote every aspect of our lives to his service, for "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

Jesus Christ himself is "the way and the truth and the life" and as such he is always calling us to repentance and to conversion, to model our lives ever more closely on his own (John 14:6). Because Christ himself is Truth, whenever we encounter him our sins are laid bare before us. We look upon the depth of his love and we see how we have failed to love him. This is always a painful situation, yet a most necessary one to attain true contrition that leads to salvation.

Truth is divisive precisely because it is the truth. Jesus speaks a word of correction, of reprimand, ultimately of love. Love reminds us that God alone must come before all else; only in this way will we ever find peace. When our priorities do not lie with God there is division because the natural ordering of the cosmos is, as it were, thrown out of whack. We need only look at the example of the prophet Jeremiah to see this.

Jeremiah, together with all of the saints, with all of those who have centered their lives on God, provide us with a clear and uncompromising example of how we are to live. Indeed,

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Jesus says, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing" (Luke 12:49)! Why does Jesus speak of fire? Fire is a symbol of the presence of God. Indeed, God himself is "a consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24) and the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles as tongues of fire (cf. Acts 2:3).

Fire is a symbol of God's judgment on sinners. When the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, offered profane fire and incense to the Lord, fire "came forth from the LORD's presence and consumed them (Leviticus 10:2). Jesus himself speaks of the evil weeds that will be tied together for burning (cf. Matthew 13:30).

Fire is also a symbol of divine purification. John the Baptist speaks of the One who will baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16) and Saint Peter speaks of the trials we endure "so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:7).

The fire that Jesus casts upon the earth does all of these things. The fire of the Holy Spirit that burns within our

hearts makes us aware of God's presence in our lives. This same reality makes us aware of our sins and shows the punishment that is due them. And yet, at the same time, this fire leads us to repentance and purifies us through the grace of God and his sacraments. All this he does because of his love.

Indeed, "Love is good, having wings of burning fire that flies through the saints' breasts and hearts and consumes whatever is material and earthly but tests whatever is pure. With its fire, love makes whatever it has touched better."<sup>1</sup>

When the fire of purification is enkindled within us to make us better, we shy away from this fire, too afraid to be hurt by it, too afraid to become more like Christ Jesus. This is not the way of discipleship; this is not the way to win the race we run.

We must always remember, that "for the sake of the joy that lay before him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). Despite what we think, being purified by the Lord always leads to joy, because it leads to God himself who is our life, our happiness and our peace. Jesus has come so that our "joy might be complete" and our joy can only be complete if

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Ambrose, *Isaac, Or the Soul* 8.77 in Arthur A. Just, Jr., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scriptures: New Testament III: Luke* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 217.

we are united with him having nothing else before him, not even our families (John 15:11).

If every member of a family followed Jesus Christ unreservedly, then every family would truly be at peace - at lasting peace - because the order of the cosmos would be restored, "for he is our peace" (Ephesians 2:14).

Placing Jesus Christ above all else, above family, work, sports, school, play, even above myself, is a great challenge for us beset as we are by our pride. Rarely will we allow ourselves to be humbled by him who humbled himself for us. Rarely will we allow him to set our hearts on fire, to reveal his presence, to show us our sin and to purify us and give us peace. "Consider," then, "how [Jesus] 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" (Hebrews 12:3-4). There is yet more that you can do! Cry out to him: "You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, hold not back" (Psalm 40:18)!