

- I had a nice opportunity to catch up with Kellan (our former seminarian) this week. She is doing well in her new ministry, and is preaching every other week. She mentioned the Gospel reading for this morning, and noted its evident difficulties for the preacher. These challenges have to do with *our Gospel's language and imagery*. I surprised Kellan by telling her something she didn't know ~ that 12 years ago, this was exactly *the same Gospel passage that Grace's search committee asked me to preach on* when I interviewed here. So, I will begin today with the words I used in my homily on that occasion.
- *Suppose I tell you about a case... a case in which a man intentionally pushes a very sharp knife into the side of another man... -> And, if I pause here, like this before saying more, it would be hard for you to avoid making an assumption. We can't help but make assumptions about the words we hear. And we hold those assumptions until a further and different meaning becomes clear. In this case, you might think I was talking about a news story, or a murder mystery. Yet, I might instead be speaking about a gifted surgeon seeking to bring healing with a different kind of sharp knife.*
- *Words are important. But, of course, the context of those words, and the intentions of the speaker, are just as important. This is why we always need to be careful to listen with attention and imagination.* This is true when we hear Scripture being read, as well as when we hear others describe their religious experience. (pause)
- Jesus tells us this, "*I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!*"¹ For me, his words evoke pictures of forest fires, gas explosions, and what happened to our poor neighbor's house down the street: *ravaging flames and intense heat reducing things to ashes*. By talking about casting fire on the earth, *is this* what Jesus had in mind? *Did he come to burn and destroy? Or, has he come to ignite and light up what he*

touches? Since his next words refer to *a Baptism that has yet to happen*,² we can tell that *Jesus is not using words in an ordinary way.*

- *Jesus' talk of fire in connection with his vocation* recalls an earlier prediction about the Messiah in Luke's Gospel. John the Baptist told the crowds who had come out to see him, "*I baptize you with water; but... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* His winnowing fork is in his hand, to... gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will *burn* with *unquenchable fire.*"³ There - in just two sentences - we have *both positive and negative images* put side by side: *fire as the sign of the Holy Spirit*, as on the Day of Pentecost; *but also fire as the unquenchable force that burns up everything useless*, until it is *nothing*.
- Now, as we observe every Ash Wednesday, *fire starts with what is good and useful and reduces it to an ashen nothing*. This fits our natural experience. Yet, for *practicing Christians, the pattern is liturgically reversed*. *Starting as an ash-covered nothing* on a particular Wednesday, you and I *journey* through the Paschal flame and the fire of Pentecost, into a season of Spirit-kindled life. *Despite their obvious differences, the ravaging fire and the building-up fire belong together*. We talk of things being *engulfed* by flames, or being *consumed* by fire. We use those same words to speak of what water can do, of what floods can do. *Jesus has come to flood the earth with the baptizing fire of the Holy Spirit*. His fire can consume and destroy all that is opposed to God's love. But the flames of his love are also like the fire that clears the forest floor for new growth, and the heat which releases pinecone seeds for a new generation of trees.
- *"...and how I wish it were already kindled!"* Jesus expresses frustration because *we so often treat the power of the Holy Spirit like we do the power of fire. Reducing both to small quantities, we make them harmless*. Candles allow small bits of flame to lighten our tables; short prayers allow brief

moments of grace to lighten our days. But tip the candle over so the fire catches the curtains, and suddenly we have a truly fearful situation. Perhaps we are intuitively aware of this - of [how encountering the unleashed Spirit of God flowing through this world is equally powerful - an agent of change for which we are not fully prepared.](#)

- To top it off, Jesus asks, *Do you think I have come to give peace on earth?* To our surprise, he answers, "[No... but rather division!](#)" [How can this be?](#) At his birth, [didn't the angels promise peace on earth](#) among those with whom God is well pleased?⁴ *But here*, he not only predicts *division* between family members, he talks about some being *against* others.⁵
- [And so, we have to reckon with a Lord Jesus whose Kingdom will bring fire and cause division.](#) But as we have seen, there is more than one way to hear these words. Proudful in our reasoning, *we too easily come to a false conclusion...* that *if the Master* was called to this dramatic role, perhaps *his disciples* are then called to it, *as well*. So we needn't worry if both fire and division between people are negative and destructive. After all, the Lord is showing us that they are for a good cause, and that God is behind them!
- [Here, we should not overlook the big difference between his decisive role as the one on whom all history turns, and our own limited roles as his disciples and followers.](#) How much more *difficult* it is to accept the *humble role of a disciple*. By his strong words *about fire*, and *division* between people, Jesus warns us about what it means *to follow him*. [Far from causing burning and conflict](#), disciples often *have to undergo* their painful effects!
- Given a free choice, while also obeying *the fallen bent of our human nature*, most of us would prefer to become *his assistants* as he starts fires. We'd be happy to serve as *his associates* while he instigates division between peoples." But here is the paradox: it turns out that [being a follower of Jesus](#)

more likely means *getting burned*, and *getting cut* by the swords of division - precisely *because of our allegiance to him*. This is what so many of the Lord's disciples have discovered throughout history.

- Jesus is *not* telling us that God wants to burn down the earth. He is *not* telling us that God means to divide people. God gives us abundant, *living water* in Jesus, and God builds true unity between his people: these are Gospel truths. Yet **Jesus is also warning us: we must prepare for the cost of following him** - for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously called *the cost of discipleship*. At the same time, Jesus is *also inviting us*. He is inviting us to discover *warm joy* - the kind of joy expressed by the two disciples after meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus: "**Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us...**, [and] while he opened to us the Scriptures?" → **May our hearts also burn within**, kindled by this same fire of the risen Lord Jesus!



James Tissot, *Jesus Discourses With His Disciples*

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Notes:

¹ Luke 12:49.

² See Luke 12:50.

³ Luke 3:16-17.

⁴ See Luke 2:14.

⁵ Luke 12:51-53.