

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 17, 2025

The Lord Jesus says in today's Gospel, "I have come to set the world on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing." What does He mean? "I have come to set the earth on fire." Isn't that a strange thing to say? An interesting turn of phrase - "I have come to set the earth on fire." I found a helpful footnote for this passage in the Didache Bible. It reads: "God offers us His love, mercy and salvation, and ardently desires that we accept and respond to these gifts. Although these gifts are offered freely and generously not all are willing to receive them. And thus, divisions will occur even within families, further evidence that Christ is a sign of contradiction." It goes on to say, "In Scripture, fire symbolizes God's presence. His love. His judgment. divine purification and the power of the Holy Spirit to effect change within us. In this passage, the Word carries all of these meanings in various degrees" and then it references paragraph 696 of the Catechism.

So, fire, fire is God's presence, God's love, His judgment, divine purification, and the power of the Holy Spirit to effect change within us. This is the fire that Jesus came to set on the earth, and that He wishes were already blazing there. Now, of course, Jesus says these things before His passion and death and resurrection. So perhaps we can say, in this day and age, in the age of the Church, the fire is already on the earth, but I suspect He would still say that He would like to see it blazing a little bit more fully. But why does He not already see this fire blazing on the earth? It's not because of some failure on His part. It's not that He couldn't, as the Son of God, accomplish what He came to accomplish in setting His fire ablaze in the world. It is because our hearts are not completely, fully open, receiving this, this fire. And that can be for a number of different reasons - maybe it is neglect on our part, neglect of spiritual things,

not prioritizing our relationship with God. Maybe it's just the reality of sin in our life, the struggle with sin. Trying to overcome these things that get in the way of the fuller version of a life of God in our soul. Maybe it's fear. We look at a figure like Jeremiah, who belonged completely to the Lord and say, 'well, he was passed into a cistern and only by the grace of God rescued from death from that cistern.' Or even the Lord Jesus Himself, who belonged absolutely to the Father and always did the Father's will. Look at what He suffered. Maybe we look at the prospect of really fully opening our hearts to the gift of the fire of God, and we say, that might cost me something. That could be painful. I might suffer because of that. Jesus Himself says, "It can bring division to families." We don't want that. We shrink away from the prospect of division coming into our family. Or what persecution? What ridicule might we suffer if we truly, totally belong to God and allowed the fire of God's presence and love, His Holy Spirit, to govern us?

The responsorial psalm this past Wednesday had the refrain: "Blessed be God, who filled my soul with fire." It's funny how after celebrating Mass year after year, I don't remember ever hearing that refrain before, but it's wonderful. "Blessed be God who filled my soul with fire." What if we could pray that every day? "Blessed be God, who filled my soul with fire." I suspect we don't all wake up in the morning with that sentiment. "Blessed be God, who filled my soul with fire." We don't always feel that zeal, or that ardor, that sort of energy for the Lord. We're not always just falling over with the joy of Lord.

When I was in the seminary, I went through this hospital ministry training program, and at the end of that five-week period or whatever it was, the criticism that the supervisor leveled at me was 'you are too even keeled.' I thought that was a good thing! [laughter]. "No,

you're just not expressive enough. Sometimes when you go into the hospital room with a patient, you have to do cry with them or whatever.”

Well, anyway, the point of what Jesus is saying is not that we have to publicly, outwardly full of energy, but the fire has to burn within at least. He's not saying you're going to put on some other kind of personality, that's not the way you are. But the fire must burn within. The fire must burn within. The fire, God's presence, His love, His judgment, divine purification, and the power of the Holy Spirit to affect change to within us.

So, just three simple reflections on today's Gospel. First is that we should remind ourselves each day we have already been given the gift of this fire. Any person who is Baptized has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. When we were baptized, God formed this gift, this gift of His fire, His presence, His life, into our soul. So, we already had it. It is a fact. So, that's a good thing to remind yourself of first thing in the morning – “I am baptized. I received the gift of the God in my soul.” Secondly, we can ask the Lord in His goodness to stir up this flame within us, to increase our ardor, increase our zeal, increase our love, increase our openness to receiving in greater and greater measure, the life of God. That our love for God would increase each day, and that it would truly become more and more the motivating and animating factor of our life especially in receiving Holy Communion. This gift of Jesus to us really should awaken something within us; awaken the response of love, pure and fuller love. So, we remind ourselves we have already received the gift, asking the Lord to stir up this gift, and then thirdly, flame, by its very nature, spreads when it is shared. Think about Easter, when we all stand individually holding our little tapers and the flame spreads from one, from the Easter Candle and spreads through the whole

church until the church illuminated by that light. This is how this fire also spreads. We share our faith, we share with others about the impact of the fire of God in our own life, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the presence of God, His love and mercy, His judgment, divine purification and all the rest. What difference has that made in our life? And if we can share that, then the fire really begins to blaze more and more.

So, that's three simple things. Remember you received the gift, asking the Lord to stir that flame more and more especially in the Eucharist, and then also sharing that flame. Jesus said, "I have come to set the earth on fire. How I wish it were already blazing." And if we do these three simple things, then we are going to get closer and closer and closer to seeing that fire really spraying to the earth and enkindling the hearts of all peoples with divine love and the power of the Holy Spirit.