

20th Sunday
8/14/2022

THE MANY FACETS OF FIRE or SPREADING THE FIRE

Today Jesus speaks jarring, shocking words and that can serve to wake us up. Pope Francis remarks, *These words aim to persuade the disciples to abandon their attitude of laziness, apathy, indifference and closure, so as to welcome the fire of God's love.*

Fire can represent many things. *Fire can signify suffering, destruction, punishment and judgement.* This summer we've been hearing about many horrible wildfires destroying everything in their way. When Jesus speaks of the baptism he must receive, he's talking about his passion and death, we can even see that as a type of fire. That would be a fire involving sufferings, destruction, punishment for human sins and a judgement on the world. Jesus is anxious to get it over, like when you want to get a painful medical procedure behind you, but only much worse. But out of a destructive fire can come new life. The destruction of Jesus' death leads to the glory of the risen Christ.

Fire can be a sign of purification. Think of gold or silver being refined. The impurities are separated from the precious metal. The good is separated from the bad, fire can be cleansing. The great fire of London in 1666 may have helped to end the great plague of London as fire destroyed many of the animals carrying the disease. Purification represents a division and Jesus reminds people that his message can cause division, even within families. One reason why early Christians were hated was because Christianity could cause divisions within families.

Now fortunately, blessedly, mercifully, for many of us, our families were where we were first evangelized, where we received our first image of God, where we first learned how to pray. But even today there are those for whom entering the Church means indifference or even active hostility from their families. Discipleship has a cost that sometimes can cut us away even from those we love. Discipleship may cost us our families. It can cost us professionally, if because of our faith we do certain things or refuse to do other things. It can cost us socially and marginalize us. It can even cost us our lives. The prophet Jeremiah knew about the cost, from the bottom

of a well. Hopefully, none of none of us will ever have to face that. The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the opposition that Jesus faced and encourages us to persevere.

Fire can also be seen as a symbol of love. St. John of the Cross wrote, O living flame of love that tenderly wounds my soul. The image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus includes a flame representing his burning love for each one of us. One title for the Sacred Heart is, glowing furnace of charity. The love of God is warm, active and alive, like a fire.

Fire also represents the Holy Spirit revealed as tongues of fire at Pentecost. Earlier in St. Luke's Gospel, also known as the gospel of the Holy Spirit, John the Baptist speaks of the messiah who will come and baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.

All this tells us about Jesus but leads to a question. What are we supposed to do? Simply put, *we're called to spread the fire that Jesus lit, the fire of God's love.* There can be a destructive fire but also a positive fire. Fire can destroy life but it can also serve and even preserve life. Again, Pope Francis says notes, *Bearing witness to the Gospel burns. It overcomes all forms of particularism and keeps charity wide open to all, with a preferential option for the poorest and the excluded.*

Each of us, each in our own way and together as members of the body of Christ, as members of the Church, surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses we hear of in today's second reading, are called to spread the fire of the Gospel. This involves living lives of intentional faith, informed by the word of God, strengthened by the sacraments, nourished by the Eucharist and encouraged by one another. It involves living out our own vocation and being faithful to the duties and responsibilities of our daily lives, often doing ordinary things with great love.

It means practicing the corporal works of mercy such as feeding the hungry, visiting the sick clothing the naked, burying the dead as well as the spiritual works of mercy such as instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful and bearing wrongs patiently.

The fire of the gospel can burn, destroy evil, purify hearts by separating good from evil. That same fire of God's love can tenderly wound our souls with love, mercy, compassion, benevolence and with many other ways of showing love of God

and love of neighbor and reveal the workings of the Holy Spirit. A good examination of conscience at the end of the day is to ask, *How have I spread the fire of the gospel today?* It may be in explaining the faith or dying for the faith. It may be something as simple as being patient in traffic or just smiling at someone, all for the love of God. Whatever it is, may each of us, each in our own way, spread that fire of God's love.