

18th August 2019 (20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

Jeremiah 38:4-6,8-10; Psalm 39(40):2-4,18; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53.

'... fire ... baptism ... division!'

Jesus, the prince of peace, speaks about fire, baptism and division! Fire consumes and destroys! Division in the family is not really something we would associate with Jesus! And a baptism that Jesus is eager to participate in! Very strange images.

In the beginning of the gospel according to Luke, we meet John the Baptist speaking about Jesus and announcing that Jesus will 'baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire!' (Luke 3:18) Later on, narrating the happenings of the first Pentecost, Luke tells us that 'tongues as of fire appeared and rested on each one' of those present. (Acts 2:3) These tongues of fire seem to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit that descends on the apostles.

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, where he will be facing his passion and death so that he could rise back to life, he seems to be frustrated that the fire that he has come to set alight on earth has not yet started burning. Fire purifies, gives heat and light; but it also consumes and destroys. What will Jesus' fire do in us, as a people, and individually? Jesus invites us to be purified through his word and through the Holy Spirit so that, once cleansed, we can bring warmth and light in the world around us. We are invited to become 'light to the world.' (Matthew 5:14)

When does this light start burning and creating the change that Jesus wants to initiate? It starts with his birth and his teaching; but perhaps today Jesus invites us to be open to let this fire burn brightly within us so that people could see us so that they too could be led to the word of God through our witness!

Pentecost happens after Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. In the gospel according to John, Jesus tells his apostles that he needs to go before he could send us the Holy Spirit. (John 14:25) The fire cannot really come to its own before Jesus is 'immersed' in his passion and death. This image of the baptism does not refer to the baptism performed by John the Baptist, or the Baptism practised in the Church. The Greek the word 'to baptise' means 'to immerse.' Jesus is suggesting that he needs to be 'immersed' in the troubled waters of his passion and death before he could rise again and send the Holy Spirit on to his disciples. As the time draws near, Jesus is getting anxious / distressed as he waits for this to happen; perhaps this is another image of Jesus praying at the garden of Gethsemane before his passion! Only through this 'baptism' can the fire of the Holy Spirit come to its own and start burning as Jesus wanted it to!

Believing in Jesus is not an easy choice. The terms 'fire' and 'baptism' already indicate the difficult choice the disciple has to make. Jesus was not born to bring lack of conflict (peace) but rather division. Peace does not mean tranquillity and lack of conflict. Jesus came to bring peace between God and humanity, but this new faith-filled relationship with God is bound to create division among those who believe. This division will demonstrate itself even in the most intimate of places; the family! The community of Luke is here probably describing its own experience; because of their faith in Jesus, many had to face persecution and death, even within their own families.

If we let the fire of the Spirit burn within us to purify us and to enlighten up, then we too, like Jesus, will be immersed in a conflict with the world and the culture we live in. At times our faith will bring us into conflict even with those closest to us. Today we can still experience this conflict as we try to deepen our faith in God in a world that increasingly refuses to acknowledge his existence.

Where does my faith take me? Jesus accepted his baptism and emerged victorious. Am I ready to be immersed and set on fire by the Spirit?

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