



Homily for 20th Sunday, Year C
Fr. Paul
8/19/07 Abbey Church, 9 am

Didn't Christ come to bring peace? Didn't he say "My peace I leave with you"? Isn't his kingdom supposed to be a kingdom of peace and reconciliation where there would be harmony between God and mankind? But here in St. Luke's gospel Jesus says: "Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth? I assure you the contrary is true; I have come for division" – division even within the family. For Jesus, as for all Jews, the bonds of family are the closest bonds on earth.

Jesus says that "he has come to light a fire on the earth." He tells his disciples that he sees his ministry as a fire to be kindled. Fire is an image of purification in the Bible, and it is also a symbol of judgment. Jesus' fire is aimed at forcing a decision, at forcing a choice either to take up his cross and follow him, or to no longer walk with him. Since he has given us free will, forcing a choice necessarily leads to division.

Jesus also speaks of his mission as a baptism that he must undergo himself, as well as a baptism which he must administer to others. His own baptism is an immersion in suffering. This central section of Luke's gospel is a kind of travel dialogue while Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem for the decisive events of his passion and death on the cross. He is totally "consumed" by what he was about to do, and those who choose to follow him must likewise be consumed by a passion for becoming like him. We see this commitment in Jeremiah in the story of his near-death in the muddy cistern and his willingness to suffer which, for him, serves as a credential of authenticity as a prophet. His willingness to undergo the purification of suffering foreshadows what Jesus did, and it is the credential of authenticity for Jesus' disciples as well.

Jesus' unsettling and uncomfortable sayings in today's gospel passage are part of a section of instruction on discipleship and preparedness. Jesus came to stir things up, to challenge us to make a commitment, to purify us through suffering, not to gloss over a lukewarm and tepid response to the good news of our salvation. John the Baptist had predicted that Jesus would come "to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Jesus is forcing us to a hard choice, a painful choice which he likens to a purifying fire and to the transformation of baptism. The peace which Jesus came to bring is not the comfort of passively listening to his word and thinking "That's nice" and doing nothing about it; his peace is the consequence of decisive action, the result of being consumed by a



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passion for identification with him in his suffering and in his glory.

Being a Christian has never been easy. It's not just a label. It's a commitment to become more Christ-like. And the reward of sharing in his suffering and humiliation and rejection by the world is eternal happiness with him and his Father in the glory and joy of heaven.