

August 14, 2022 – Fighting Fire with Fire (20th Sunday in Ordinary Time)  
Gospel of Luke 12:49-53  
Fr. John

‘I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled...’

These words of Jesus from today’s gospel reading would hardly bring much solace to those who are either engaged in fighting wild fires or those who have lost loved ones or their homes to fires raging in many areas of North America and Europe.

In this context, fire is viewed as a threatening destructive force. Even hearing the piercing sounds of fire truck sirens as they speed down our city streets is always a rather ominous signal of something bad happening somewhere.

But fire, like a lot of things in nature is an ambiguous element. It can be both death-dealing and life-giving. For example, if it weren’t for fire our prehistoric ancestors would not have survived the sometimes unfriendly climate and environment in which they lived. Even today, controlled fires are used to contain the spread of wild fires. [A literal application of the phrase: ‘Fighting fire with fire’].

In the context of today’s gospel reading, Jesus uses the powerful consuming element of fire to awaken his hearers to the radicalness of the gospel. Sometimes when we encounter the listlessness or apathy in another person, we might be moved to say: ‘someone should light a fire under that guy!’ or on the other hand, if someone is exhibiting great energy we might remark that ‘he’s going like a house on fire’.

The fascinating thing about fire, good or bad is that it’s always in motion - it’s active! It’s never the same from one moment to the next. Perhaps that’s the response which Jesus was trying to elicit from his listeners. [‘Be doers of the word - not hearers only’].

Of course when the word of God does move us to action - we may wind up in trouble - like the prophet Jeremiah who wound up being thrown down a well.

It seems, for example, whenever Christians were persecuted it was always because they were standing up and going against the grain of the dominant culture of the day. They were seen as a threat to the status quo of society. As a priest friend of mine used to say: ‘they didn’t crucify Jesus because he was a nice guy!’ No, he was perceived as a trouble maker that had to be dealt with. The high priests and pharisees saw him as a heretic undermining the religious establishment of the day. Pontius Pilate was persuaded that Jesus was a threat to Roman rule in Judea.

Yes when two opposing elements are rubbed together - the friction eventually leads to fire - for good - as in the case where it leads to action - or for bad when it leads to division - even within households as Jesus said.

These days, the gospel can even clash with a ‘pseudo-Christianity’ that promises material success or merely goes along the ‘civic religion’ of the day. That’s why whenever the Church get too cozy with any particular governing body or popular ideology, it begins to lose its prophetic voice.

The ultimate goal of Jesus' ministry was that of unity - the unity for which he prayed at the Last Supper ['That they may be one, Father, as You and I are one..'] But it's a unity that can only come with the difficult process of purification - a trial by fire.

One comes to know God through great suffering and great love. The extent to which we have experienced both of these paths measures the depth of our relationship with God.

The good news however, is that Jesus will walk with us through these fires that are unavoidable in life. Placing our trust in him, we will emerge as better people for it.

As the letter to the Hebrews states: 'Let us run with perseverance the race set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.'

May we pray that the fire of his divine love will always burn within our hearts.