

20TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - CYCLE C

Jesus offers us three powerful images in today's gospel. The first image is that of a blazing fire that he himself will ignite. The second image speaks of a mysterious Baptism that he must undergo, and the third image speaks of creating division within families, two against three and three against two. I will address each image beginning with the second one: Baptism. I begin with the image of his mysterious Baptism because this image I would suggest is the key that unlocks the meaning of the other two.

So, what is this mysterious Baptism that Jesus must undergo. When Jesus uses this image, he is referring to his passion and death. But why describe his brutal death as Baptism. Mercifully the Baptisms I officiate at look nothing like Calvary.

To fully appreciate this image, we must understand that in this early period, Baptism involved the full immersion of the person's body in water, a proper dunking. The water would momentarily consume the person, swallowing them whole, before they would rise up again, reborn.

In the same way, the Baptism that Jesus faced, was one that would consume him entirely. Jesus was immersed in suffering before being plunged into death itself. This Baptism of pain and suffering is what Jesus wished was already over, and who could blame him.

The fruit of this suffering however was the Resurrection, and the birth of the Church, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, (Jesus taught) it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

This brings us to the image of Fire. Like a fire when it is kindled the Church grew slowly at first but ultimately covered the face of the whole world. This however was not a destructive fire, ravenously devouring all before it. Scripture often uses the image of fire to speak of God's presence and love (Deut. 4:24; Acts 2:3) and to speak of Divine purification (Mt. 3:11; Lk 3:16; 1 Pet 1:7). St. Paul himself proclaims, "... our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that,

"While water signifies birth and the fruitfulness of life given in the Holy Spirit, fire symbolizes the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit's actions" (CCC 696)

The fire that Jesus wished were blazing already, is the fire of God's love and of God's Holy Spirit.

The final image, that of division; dividing families three against two and two against three, is the most challenging to unpack. Jesus 'the home wrecker' is not a title we usually associate with him. To understand this image of division we must return to the Baptism of the Cross. Crucifixion was an execution of such suffering and indignity, that it was reserved for those deemed to be the most reprehensible of criminals.

A crucified Saviour would have been incomprehensible to most Jews and Romans alike, "... we proclaim Christ crucified (St. Paul teaches), a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). Accepting Jesus as Lord, a blasphemer according to the Jewish authorities, and a traitor according to the Roman authorities, was easily enough to divide many families. Division was therefore inevitable outcome of choosing Christ. Jesus does not shy away from this challenge, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me (Jesus taught); and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt. 10:37). We must love Jesus 1st, before every other. This is very challenging but the reward for those who embrace him is infinitely greater, " ... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake (Jesus taught), will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life" (Mt. 19:29).