

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already! There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress till it is over!

'Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on a household of five will be divided: three against two and two against three; the father divided against the son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

(Luke 12:49–53)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- This text paints a different picture from the gentle, compassionate Jesus of popular belief. It is just one example of Jesus displaying human emotion and passion for his cause.
- One of the symbols of the Holy Spirit is fire. At Pentecost, the Spirit came in the form of tongues of flame to the disciples in the upper room.
- The baptism that Jesus is still to experience is his death, his 'baptism of fire' or the persecution he undergoes because of his commitment to doing the will of the Father.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This is a difficult text because it challenges our notions of what Jesus was like. The imagery that Jesus uses has a long history in the Old Testament, where we frequently read of people passing through the fire of testing and judgment. John had prophesied about the one who would come bringing a baptism of fire and judgment, but it had never occurred to him that the one who was to come may be the first to undergo that baptism! This rare glimpse into the mind of Jesus reveals an agonising mixture of impatience and reluctance. Convinced that God's redemptive plan requires him to bring upon earth the fiery baptism of judgment—not by inflicting it upon others but by undergoing it himself—he feels handicapped and thwarted until this mission can be accomplished.

The reference to households being divided may well be directed at Luke's community itself. Faith in Jesus could well be the cause of division in families. While predominantly Gentile, Luke's community did have Jewish Christians. Some Jews failed to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, and in the late first century, Jews expelled Christians from their synagogues. To persist in Christian belief would have caused great division.

- What causes you to have 'a fire in your belly'? What do you get passionate about?
- How do you deal with people who do not understand or accept your faith in Jesus?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Has your coming to faith in Christ caused division or awkwardness in your family or with friends?
- Who are the people you know who have 'a fire in their belly' or great passion about their beliefs?
- Have you experienced a rift within your family? What was the cause of the division and hurt? How was this overcome? Or does it still need to be overcome? How can you help heal the pain and division? Share your stories.
- Reflect this week on the things that divide your family or friends. Try to overcome those divisions and work to re-establish harmony.
- Use today's collect as your prayer this week:

O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire.

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

In the history of the Church, there have been numerous examples of division caused by faith and numerous examples of an overly zealous defense of the faith. Some of these are heroic and some are shameful to us now.

- You could talk about the early persecution of the Church by the Roman authorities and introduce some of the great martyrs of the early church who faced death rather than recant their faith. Many are mentioned in the first Eucharistic prayer. A simple internet search will bring up a great number of the stories of early martyrs.
- You could draw parallels with more recent examples of martyrdom or of people of great faith who had passion and zeal.
- You could discuss situations where religion (not only Christianity) lies at the heart of conflict or tension. Extend this to a discussion of how God would wish such conflicts to be resolved. What lessons can we learn for resolving conflicts in our own lives or relationships?

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

Like many symbols, fire can have both positive and negative connotations. It can be a painful and destructive force to be feared and shunned. It can also be a purifying agent, which burns away that which is unwanted. It is used in the testing of precious metals. In the Australian context, bushfire is the cause of death and destruction, but it also causes the regeneration and new birth of many native species of flora.

Fire is a symbol of passion and is often used in turns of phrase that capture this idea: fire in the belly, for instance, or the fire of one's love.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- What passion for the faith is displayed in your own community? How can that passion be harnessed and directed? If the passion is not present, how can it be ignited?
- Use a flame in an open bowl as a focus for prayer (a small piece of firelighter on a bed of sand does a great job). Pray for strength and for passion. Pray for each other and for all who spread the Gospel. A suitable song could be 'Be not afraid' (GA 449). Conclude with the prayer of exorcism at RCIA §94A.

NOTES

Dotted lines for taking notes.