**TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)**

Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe, Priest and Martyr; Blessed Michael Joseph McGivney

Jer 38:4-6, 8-10; Ps 40; Heb 12:1-4; Lk 12:49-53

*Lord, come to my aid!*

**COMMENTARY**

*Fire, Baptism, and Christ’s Peace*

The words of today’s gospel arouse more than a little perplexity. We may find it difficult to understand, in particular, Jesus’ assertion to bring not peace but division. It is necessary, therefore, carefully to meditate on this under the guidance of God’s own Spirit. So let us pray to be enlightened by this divine light: may the Lord open our hearts, now as at the beginning of evangelism, so that we may understand His proclaimed words for our lives (cf. Acts 16:14).

There are three basic statements of Jesus, and all of them aim to clarify the true mission He fulfills.

*1. “I have come to set the earth on fire.” Christ’s “Fire” Mission*

First of all, Jesus’ is a mission of “fire.” The expression “I have come to…”, used here as on many other occasions, shows the clear consciousness of His task. Indeed, His heart burns all for it, as He Himself makes explicit in the following, “And how I wish it were already blazing!” But what fire is this?

Firstly, we get a glimpse from Jesus’ statement that the fire brought by Him “to earth” is logically the heavenly fire, coming “from heaven.” It is, therefore, the divine fire, that is, God’s fire for the world. Jesus’ language traces that of the prophets of Israel, and in accordance with their teaching, the divine fire of which He speaks symbolizes purification, judgment and thus final salvation for the world. With this in mind, John the Baptist, the “greatest of the prophets” and forerunner of Christ, warns everyone of God’s impending judgment by fire, as St. Luke the evangelist himself reports, “Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Lk 3:9). Moreover, it will be God’s Messiah who will carry out the final judgment, “His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Lk 3:17).

On the other hand, however, such an image of fire spontaneously refers to God’s revelation to Moses in the burning thorn bush, just like the fire burning in the bush, in which and from which God declared his mission for the People: “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come downto rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:7-8). Thus, it is the fire of merciful love that God always has for each of His creatures.

Finally, the fire here could also allude to the Holy Spirit who will descend on the apostles, “tongues as of fire” precisely (cf. Acts 2:1-3). The Spirit of God, is the gift of the risen Christ that God sends into the hearts of the faithful. The Spirit will be as fire that purifies the heart, enlightens the mind, and kindles in the whole being a burning love for God.

Therefore, it will be the fire of love for God that Jesus now wanted so much that it was already kindled in every person. Therefore, Christ’s mission in addition to being “of fire” is also shown to be a mission “of fire,” that is, “fiery” (something that sets on fire) or even inflaming, blazing. The fire that Jesus brings to earth is already burning in Him! We catch a glimpse here of Jesus’ soul, all bent on the fulfillment of the mission entrusted to Him by the Father. He desires what the Father wants: to fulfill the world’s plan of salvation according to God’s will. And this ardent desire of Christ, which one hopes will also be experienced by His disciples today, is made even more explicit with the mysterious declaration about the baptism He is to receive after the one in the Jordan River.

*2. “There is a baptism with which I must be baptized.” The Mission’s Fulfillment and Christ’s Zeal*

To what event is Jesus referring with this phrase? In this regard, it should be remembered that, as we explained earlier on the occasion of the Baptism of the Lord, “The original Greek word for ‘baptism’ is ‘*baptisma/baptismos*’ and comes from the verb *‘bapto*’ (with the intensive form ‘*baptizo*’), which means primarily ‘to immerse’ or ‘to submerge’. The noun in question then indicates primarily an act/bath of ‘immersion/submergence.’” […]

Keeping the meaning of the term in mind, we can understand the Gospel’s reference to yet another baptism for Jesus after the one in the Jordan. Declaring: “There is a *baptism* with which *I must be baptized*,” (Lk 12:50°), Jesus refers to his passion and death on the cross, because Jesus will speak about this baptism again, connecting it to the action of drinking the Father’s cup (cf. Mk 10:50; 14:36; Jn 18:11). It is a total immersion, a baptism in fact, with and in “blood and water” to take away the sins of the world (cf. Jn 19:34). This will be Christ’s supreme baptism, which encompasses all of other baptisms, including his baptism in the River Jordan. Thus, we can also understand Saint John’s mysterious insistence in one of his letters to the faithful: “This is the one *who came through water and blood*, Jesus Christ, *not by water alone, but by water and blood*” (1Jn 5:6a).

In this perspective, we also understand the Baptist’s announcement concerning the baptism that Christ will offer to the people: “He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Lk 3:16). This alludes to a very special immersion: in the Holy Spirit and in the fires of purification and divine judgment. The special connection between Christ’s “baptism” and the “fire” brought by Him to earth then emerges even more clearly. And Jesus reiterates His strong, indeed “anguished” desire for the fulfillment of all things according to the Father’s will, “How great is my anguish until it is accomplished!”

*3. “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth?” A Necessary Clarification on the Mission of True Peace*

The third and last statement of Jesus is the most difficult to understand, because it is shown to contradict the other teachings on His mission of peace. Already the Fathers of the Church, such as St. John Chrysostom, wondered in this regard how and in what sense Jesus had said those words, when He Himself had recommended to His disciples to greet, upon entering every home: “Peace to this household” (Lk 10:5). At Jesus’ birth, moreover, as St. Luke points out, the angels joyfully announced “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Lk 2:14). Jesus himself, at the Last Supper, said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (Jn 14:27). How is it then that in today’s gospel He claimed not to bring peace but division?

Precisely in the light of all of Jesus’ teaching, particularly because of this last quotation (from Jn 14:27), we can understand the statement about His mission of “not-peace”. Here, He wants to clarify the true character of His mission. For true peace in life in communion with God, not the false peace of humanity in a “quiet” life without God (“Even among thieves there is concord and peace,” noted some ancient author). There are then those who welcome with faith this true peace, announced by Jesus and given in his mission culminating in his “baptism” in blood and water, and others who reject it. This is how division is created in society and families in the face of God’s message of salvation, because of humanity’s closure in its freedom and despite God’s will “that everyone be saved” (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). This is unfortunately the sad situation, denounced already by the prophet Micah in the Old Testament: “The son belittles his father, the daughter rises up against her mother, The daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and your enemies are members of your household” (Mi 7:6).

Jesus’ words, then, still trace those of Israel’s prophets, as already seen in the previous saying about “fire.” They sound as a strong warning to his disciples in the face of the predictable situation of division that was happening *de facto* (and still happens) in the face of the figure of Jesus, the sign of contradiction. All then are invited, indeed required, to make right discernment to follow the good that God offers in Jesus. This is precisely why, after the saying about division, Jesus denounces the inability of many “hypocrites” to discern and judge what is right on the divine spiritual plane (cf. Lk 12:54-56).

Let us pray, therefore, that the Lord will give us, his missionary disciples today, His holy desire, zeal, and anguish for the fulfillment of God’s mission in the world. May we have the grace of discernment and perseverance in adversity, “while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12,2), being taught and inspired by His words and deeds. And may we continue to convey the fire of God brought by Jesus to everyone and everywhere, to the ends of the earth and to the end of the world.

*Useful points to consider:*

**Pope Francis**, ***Angelus,*** *St Peter’s Square,* ***Sunday, 14 August 2016***

The *fire* that Jesus speaks of [in Lk 12:49-53] is the fire of the Holy Spirit, the presence living and working in us from the day of our Baptism […] Jesus wants the Holy Spirit to blaze like fire in our heart, for it is only from the heart that the fire of divine love can spread and advance the Kingdom of God. […] If we open ourselves completely to the action of this fire which is the Holy Spirit, He will give us the boldness and the fervor to proclaim to everyone Jesus and his consoling message of mercy and salvation, navigating on the open sea, without fear. […]

With this fire of the Holy Spirit we are called to become, more and more, communities of people who are guided and transformed, full of understanding; people with expanded hearts and joyful faces. Now more than ever there is need for priests, consecrated people and lay faithful, with the attentive gaze of an apostle, to be moved by and to pause before hardship and material and spiritual poverty, thus characterizing the journey of evangelization and of the mission with the healing cadence of closeness. It is precisely the fire of the Holy Spirit that leads us to be neighbours to others, to the needy, to so much human misery, to so many problems, to refugees, to displaced people, to those who are suffering.

At this moment I am thinking with admiration especially of the many priests, men and women religious and lay faithful who, throughout the world, are dedicated to proclaiming the Gospel with great love and faithfulness, often even at the cost of their lives. Their exemplary testimony reminds us that the Church does not need bureaucrats and diligent officials, but passionate missionaries, consumed by ardour to bring to everyone the consoling word of Jesus and his grace. This is the fire of the Holy Spirit.

**Pope Francis**, ***Angelus,*** *St Peter’s Square,* ***Sunday, 18 August 2019***

Jesus warns the disciples that the time for decision has arrived. In fact, his coming into the world coincides with the time for decisive choices: the option for the Gospel cannot be delayed. And in order to make this call clearer, he alludes to the fire that he himself came to bring to earth. He says: “I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled” (v. 49). These words aim to persuade the disciples to abandon their attitude of laziness, apathy, indifference and closure, so as to welcome the fire of God’s love; that love which, as Saint Paul reminds us, “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rm 5:5). Because it is the Holy Spirit that makes us love God and love our neighbour. It is the Holy Spirit whom we all have within us. […] And so, with the adoration of God and service to others — practised together, adoring God and serving others — the Gospel truly manifests itself as a fire that saves, that changes the world beginning with a change in the heart of each one.