

20th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; CYCLE - C; Aug. 14th 2022
Jeremiah 38: 4-6, 8-10; Hebrews. 12: 1-4; Luke. 12: 49-53

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Christ is known to be the Prince of Peace and at the Last Supper Jesus said to his apostles, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”** (Jn. 14:27). And also, after the resurrection whenever Jesus appeared to his apostles he greeted them saying, *“Peace be with you.”* At the Last Supper Jesus also prayed to the Heavenly Father for unity among his followers. Christianity is always known for its effort to promote peace, harmony and love in the world. But when we read today’s gospel passage we are confused and upset, for the very Jesus who always stood for peace and unity claims that he is here to **set fire and division** among the people. Already we are upset over the fire and division caused by the terrorists all over the world. The entire humanity is disturbed and lost peace of mind. So as believers when we try to turn to Jesus for real peace and unity, **he says, “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division?”** In order to reconcile with these words of Jesus we need to understand the interpretation of this passage.

Jesus says, ***“I have come to set the earth on fire.”*** What does he mean by that? The word **fire** has got various symbolic meanings in the Bible in both Old Testament and New Testament. *In the Old Testament fire is the symbol of the presence of God.* For instance in the burning bush God appeared to Moses (Ex. 3). In Exodus.19:18 we read that the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai in fire. Secondly, in all culture fire is the element which purifies the impurity by burning it. The more the gold is burnt in fire the more purified it becomes and it glitters. Fire also stands for the spiritual purification God gives to the sinners (Ez1 22: 19-22). Thirdly, fire in the language of the Prophets is the symbol of God’s judgment or punishment (Is. 66: 16; Amos 7: 4). The fire also symbolizes the glory and holiness of God. *Coming to the New Testament we see the use of fire in different ways. For example, John the Baptist says, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* The early Christians understood the Spirit and fire in terms of the Pentecostal experience where the Holy Spirit descending in the form of fire (Acts 2:3). Again, John the Baptist sees the fire as the judgment of God. He says in Lk 3: 17 **“His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn but the chap he will burn with unquenchable fire.”** When Jesus uses the term fire here he keeps in mind the purification he brought to the world; the gift of the Holy Spirit and the final judgment waiting for

those who refuse to follow his teachings.

Then, Jesus says, **“I have come to establish division on earth, not peace.”** When Jesus started his teaching the division between good and the evil became visible among his audience. There were people who followed his teaching and there were many who opposed to it. So in a way the Jewish community was divided. This division was seen among the families too. For, in the same household there were members who believed in Jesus and others opposed to it. So Jesus brought the division on earth; **division between right and wrong; good and evil.** Even now the division continues in the families, communities and world as a whole between good and evil. This division is healthy and most needed in the world.

As Christians we are supposed to bring fire and division in the world by challenging people, who fail to follow the values and practice their faith; who are engaged in wrong doings. We are called to conduct a holy war, a war which is not against people of certain nationalities or cultures, rather against the evil forces. In our country till Abraham Lincoln came into power, the slave trade and slavery went in full swing for centuries and nobody felt anything wrong. But by his action of abolishing slavery he made a division between the North and South. Apparently it was the division of the nation; but that division brought some good and eventually the unity of the nation. Before Martin Luther King started his human right movement, nobody bothered about the blacks in the country. But by his action he brought division and fire in the country which culminated in the establishment of the rights to the blacks. Through today’s gospel Jesus is asking each Christian to bring this fire and division in the world between good and evil. Had the Christians, who are a big majority in the country kept their baptismal promise, no doubt they could have brought the fire of purification and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our country long ago. Let us remember the old saying, **“He who is on fire cannot sit on a chair.”** If we sit and relax and do not react to the evils around us there is no fire in us, the Holy Spirit is away from us. Once a Protestant minister commented, *“Catholic Church is a sleeping giant and it is time for it to wake up.”* Yes, in the world of evils the Church has a big role to play to keep God alive among us; every Christian has to play the same role.