

20th Sunday (C)

17th August 2025

‘Fire to the Earth’

Jer 38: Jeremiah thrown into the well Ps 39: *He drew me from the deadly pit*

Heb 12: *so many witnesses ... in the fight against sin ...*

Lk 12: 49–53: *I have come to bring fire to the earth ...*

The seminary where I studied for the priesthood, the ‘Venerable English College’ in Rome — 20 of us were there just 2 weeks ago for the Jubilee — has as its motto *Ignem Veni Mittere in Terram*, which are words from Luke’s Gospel today: *I have come to bring fire to the earth*. This was for an understandable reason: the seminary was founded there because to train Catholic priests in England then was illegal and highly dangerous. They were likely to have been executed long before they were ever ordained. The Reformation had taken hold, and there really were fires blazing across Europe burning up Catholics and Protestants alike. Christ’s painful words about divisions were becoming all too true.

Why fire? — why not peace? Why has our faith in the God of *peace* sometimes brought division and violence in its wake, rather than peace? Christ even suggested that it would. It’s surely the same question as why the good and faithful prophet Jeremiah gets thrown down the well, and why the supremely good Son of God is put to death on

a Cross. The good get attacked for speaking uncomfortable truths; Christ Himself suffers violence and death because of Who He Is, and for saying so.

Let’s go back to Jesus’s own *image of fire*. It’s an ambivalent image. There are good things about fire like heat, light, cooking, power, warding off predators ...; and then there are bad things like being burnt, fire-damage, injury, death, pillage ... Basically, fire can warm, and give life, or it can burn and take life. Even in nature where forest fires are a natural part of the ecosystem, fire both destroys the life of trees and yet renews the life of the soil.

When Jesus says He brings “fire to the earth,” we again see a two-sided image: positive things like being ‘aglow with the Spirit,’ being ‘on fire with faith,’ lighting up the darkness, kindling the faith in others, bringing warmth into people’s lives; ... and then we see the negative things, like bringing discord among people, sowing painful divisions, bringing upon oneself the hatred of the sinful. Jesus doesn’t mean extreme things like being consumed by a fiery bigotry, or flaring out against others in

self-righteousness. But nevertheless, it's still ambivalent. Jesus's fire brings life in the Spirit, but also brings pain in the presence of evil. It brought upon Him the pain of suffering and death; it can bring upon any of us the pain of being at odds with others in matters of faith or morals.

It comes down to two things: what importance we attach to Jesus; and to what extent we are sinful. If Christ is the Son of God, then it is of supreme importance for everyone; but if sin and ignorance cloud our view and hide the true God, then what is in fact vitally important can be dismissed as unimportant. And hence there is an inbuilt tension between those who fully accept Christ, and those who won't. The very person of Christ provokes a reaction, a need to decide one way or the other: is He or isn't He?

For those who do believe in Him, there's an urgency of sharing this good news with others, a joy in helping others find faith, a disappointment in the rejection by others of the faith we know to be true. This tension is there. But if this tension is heightened by sin, violence can be the tragic outcome. Christ is arrested, falsely tried and

killed; unbeliever is unsettled by believer, and reprisals can result; Protestants oust Catholics, and Catholics retaliate; practising Catholics feel let down by lapsed Catholics. If I am faithful, but another member of my family is not, then this can cause distress, argument or even resentment.

The tensions will be there, because Jesus is important, and sin does exist. Yet violence of word or deed I must resist. I am not called to be castigating, but to be compassionate; I am not called to be self-righteous, but to be aglow with my faith, that others will see and feel the warmth of my life, even if they find it uncomfortable. It can be a pain of healing, like that of freezing fingers placed in warm water. When the fire of someone's faith in Christ warms others, it can seem to burn them if they are cold. The truth is that they are not being burnt, but warmed back to life. However, in response to the pain there can sometimes be a cruel reaction against us. This is the fire Christ brings to the earth: a light we live by, a warmth we share, a pain that if necessary we suffer: *I came to cast fire on the earth and would that it were already kindled.*