

Homily Rerun: August 14, 2016 ~ Fr. Seno



My dear friends, we hear of division and fire. Jesus, who came to reconcile mankind, declared that he has come to light fire on earth, that he has not come to bring peace but rather division. When the birth of Jesus was announced to the Shepherds of Bethlehem, it was accompanied by a host of angels proclaiming and singing the choruses of peace. "... and on earth peace to those on who his favor rest" (Lk 2:14). When Jesus was presented in the temple, "Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted" (Lk 2:34). In the beginning of Jesus ministry, John the Baptist speaks of the one who will come after him saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire ... but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Lk 3:16-17).

My dear friends, the same Jesus who wishes peace and who represents peace says he has come to set the world ablaze and how he wishes the fire were ignited already. The question is: how did the infant Jesus who came to bring peace to the world turn now to bring fire, sword and division? We need to understand the paradoxical terms used by Jesus in today's text properly.

The first image fire, connotes *purification*. Fire is a powerful purifier. Metal is not as strong or useful when it contains impurities. Impurities in metal or other substances are to be expected. Before these impurities are separated from metal, it must go through the furnace. In this way, too, God's word purifies us. Fire was seen as a purifier by Prophet Zechariah when he said that, "... and I will refine them as silver is refined, and I will test them as gold is tested..." (Zechariah 13:9). Malachi likens the Messiah to a refiner's fire "He will sit refining and purifying (Silver), and he will purify the sons of Levi..." (Malachi 3:2-3). In the same in the Old Testament, fire was closely associated with the presence of God. When God first appeared to Moses, he did so in fire flaming out of a bush (Ex 3:2). Fire was associated with the word of God. In Jeremiah (23:29) God asks "is not my word like fire says the Lord, like a hammer shattering rocks?" We also recalled that before prophet Isaiah started to proclaim God's word, his lips were first cleansed by a burning ember (Is 6:6-7). The image of fire associated with Jesus as a Messiah, the word of God, the agent of God and the refining instrument of God.

The second image involving discord and division, Jesus, whom Prophet Isaiah prophesied would be a Prince of Peace (Is 9:5), announces as he came, not to have come to establish peace but to sow division. What does Jesus mean? In the light of his consistent call for charity, starting with the sermon on the plain in which he commands love of one's enemies (Lk 6:27) and continuing through the parable of the Good Samaritan in which he extols differences for setting aside national prejudices and animosities to help another in need (Lk 10:29-37). Jesus clearly does not intend to be taken literally here. He is using irony to shock his audience and capture their full attention.

The coming of Jesus as Simeon has foretold, would indeed, cause serious division among people and families. Jesus, however, never intended the splintering of society among families. He came, precisely to bring unity, to save all the people of the earth and to unite them as children of God. But people varied greatly in their reception of Jesus and it was the differences in their response that actually led to the divisions among family members and friends. For example, in the family where the children are God fearing and the parents are not, there will be serious division and tension in that family. The same thing goes with a situation where the wife has accepted Jesus while the husband has not. That house is always on fire, full of accusation and counter accusation. Whenever one decides to live a holy life, he or she becomes a living and practical judgement on those around him or her. Some people readily accepted Jesus and whole-heartily adopted their lifestyles to follow him and his teaching. Others proved hostile or indifferent to Jesus and his teaching, and felt threatened or abandoned by those who changed their ways to conform to Christianity.

The peace that Christ came to bring is not the worldly peace as some people may define it, but the peace of God. The difference is that human peace is basically superficial, a matter of trade-offs and compromises, but the peace of God is basically a matter of truth, integrity and love that always provides inner harmony. God's peace is that loving communion with Him, with one's neighbor, and with one's self which comes from living the message of the beatitudes.

It is that kind of peace that Maximilian Kolbe had, when in the Nazi concentration camp during the second World War, gave his life to save another inmate and was starved to death; the kind of peace that the Japanese martyrs in Nagasaki had when they sang hymns of praise to God as they were being crucified; the kind of peace that the Uganda martyrs had when they were being burnt alive.

My dear friends, regardless of what the world says, or name given to us, we must give testimony to all the demands of God's love "while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of our faith" (Heb.12:2). The Christian life is all about being at peace with everyone. We should not focus our attention only on what it will cost us because the reward is far greater than the suffering we will encounter in championing the cause of peace in our world.