

Homily for August 19, 2001
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Jeremiah 38:4-6,8-10
Hebrews 12:1-4
Luke 12:49-53

With our eyes fixed on Jesus, we can handle the fire that faith unleashes.

When I entered the seminary to see if there might be a possibility to become a priest somewhere in my future, I heard this advice from prudent minds: “Don’t get carried away, we don’t want you going off the deep end.”

That was only the first time I received counsel that, though well meaning, seemed to tame something unleashed whenever I read the gospels. After all, one did not want to “burn out” much less cause trouble.

But that’s what the gospels do. They start fires in us. They cause trouble. The gospels are a pain in the neck of prudent heads and moderate minds. They’re surely a greater threat to worldly or Church authority than Jeremiah was to those princes who wanted him put to death for demoralizing the army and the people. They threw Jeremiah in a cistern, where he became the proverbial, “stick in the mud.” Jesus we just stick on a wall. We paint him pious, nice and pretty, surely not a troublemaker or a firebrand. In fact, if we keep Jesus on a wall at a distance, he really can’t get to us with a moveable cross which would dare come so near as to invade our present moment and sit next to us at table. But Jesus was a firebrand: “I have come to light a fire

on the earth, how I wish the blaze were ignited. ...Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth? The contrary is true; I have come for division,” says Luke chapter twelve.

Oh, of course, we know that this is not the whole story. After all, he was called the Prince of Peace, and he promised a peace that “the world cannot give.” As for causing division, why would his priestly prayer ask that we might be completely one in him and in each other? Moreover, the gospels readily provide a litany of love. The problem is, I think, that the love, peace and unity that Christ offers are at odds with the counterfeits we coin. If Christ’s peace takes hold of us, it brings an interior freedom that makes us dangerous and divisive, especially if we cannot be bought off or intimidated.

Jesus’ unity is repugnant to any person or culture that demands moral accommodation as its cost. His love is obnoxious to anyone who thinks charity begins at home. His love does not come cheap, nor his peace at any price. In fact, in this matter of following Jesus, even households can be divided – parishes can be divided – if the price of unity is deception. Brothers and sisters, not only in blood, but in community of faith – can find themselves in opposition as we well know at times.

The command of love itself stokes the fire of conflicts – both with others and within our own hearts – over money, territory, schools, family, and tribe. Peace and unity will come, not by dousing the fire of faith or declaring a false truce with evil, but by focusing our attention on the one who enkindled love in the first place – as Hebrews twelve proclaims: “Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires. ...Remember him. Do not grow despondent or abandon the struggle.”

All are welcome at the table of the Lord here – each of us is welcome – the same food for all.

A wealthy young woman from a Latin American country was going to school in the United States, and her values were changing, partly due to the influence, chaplains, and roommates. She was shifting from the preoccupation with material things to at least a questioning mode. She discussed all this with the chaplain and asked, “How can I change my parents? They’re so materialistic.” “You can’t,” the chaplain said. “They’re older and it’s unlikely they will change. But you can change yourself and they will see the difference in you.” She pondered that and he gave her a further suggestion: “Begin by staying here some summer and working in the inner city, or working here on campus with the poor children we bring around. Or take that famous “spring break” (which is pure hedonism for most college students) and go on the one-week expedition we have to places we help – to Appalachia, Haiti, Peru. They aren’t sightseeing tours; you get a taste of working with and for the poor. Or, take one of the courses here which combines the study

of justice with the works of justice, with an involvement with social agencies in the city,” he continued. She took his advice.

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