

Homily081819

## I HAVE COME TO SET THE EARTH ON FIRE.

It was 4:40 AM on Christmas Eve in the year 2000. I was awakened from my sleep by shouting and a pounding on the front door of the Rectory. It was a Sunday morning. As I stumbled down the steps to open the door I saw flashing lights outside. I thought there must have been an accident and they wanted to use the Rectory phone. (This was before cell phones.) I opened the front door in my night clothes and a fireman said: "Are you the priest?" I said: "Yes." "Well your church is on fire, Father!" That was the fastest I ever got dressed. I went across the street to where several Fire Companies were fighting the flames already. I was truly in shock. I wasn't thinking. I was just amazed to see the flames shooting out everywhere. I will never forget being struck by the power of those flames. Those flames melted the steel girders in the roof.

That day awakened in me a sense of the power of fire. So when I hear Jesus say, "I have come to light a fire on the earth." it gets my attention. Fire does a lot of things. It destroys; it provides heat and light; it purifies; it gives off energy; it consumes. Fire transforms. It is powerful. Perhaps the most powerful force in our universe, the source and reality of every star. So when Jesus says he has come to light a fire on the earth I have to listen and seek to understand what he means.

Last Sunday's reading from the Gospel of Luke had Jesus cautioning his hearers to be vigilant and attentive in life. The week before he cautioned against greed and wanting too many things. Before that it was about praying and being persistent and consistent in our prayer. Today he speaks about who he is and why he has come. He speaks about what his presence and his words and his deeds are meant to accomplish. To set this world on fire. This world needs to be set on fire! What does he mean?

The evil that exists and has been unleashed needs to be consumed, destroyed, removed from the face of the earth—much like forest fires consume the accumulated debris of the forests so that there can be new life and new growth. There are things in our lives that need to be completely removed. Selfish attitudes of mind and heart, the spirit of hatred and unforgiveness, animosity and arrogance, lustfulness and anger, the lukewarm spirit of toleration of evil. These spirits are destructive spirits. They have no place in the kingdom of God. They are to have no

place in the re-creation and renewal of the face of the earth. But we are powerless to rid ourselves of these evils. It is Christ who must burn them away. Yes, it will cause us pain but it is necessary. Much like surgery causes us pain but is actually necessary for our healing, so do the fires of Christ bring true relief and the hope of new life even though there initially there is pain. Just as pruning is painful to the plant and seems to be threatening to its life, actually it enhances the possibility of greater growth and full blossoming.

But the other dimension of fire is even more important. As it purifies it also transforms. New growth. New life. Fullness of life. Abundance. Pure and unsullied reality begins to emerge. God's love—as evidenced in Jesus Christ—wills the good of the other and wills opposition to all that is evil and destructive. Jesus is passionate and on fire for all that is good in this world and in life. But Jesus is not passionate about all that is—in this world.

His Word is a searing word that sets aflame and purifies that which has been affected by sin and evil in our world. His Word will challenge my pet indulgences and my resistance to His grace. His Truth is the only Truth there is. It makes demands. But His Truth also gives life. Each of us has to pay attention, assess what is going on in each situation, sense what the Lord is doing and then throw in with the Way of Jesus. Being a Catholic means that we catch on to what is going on around us. It means that we “get” what Our Lord is trying to do. It means that we have thrown our lot in with Christ more so than with anything in this world. It means that we recognize and accept the purification that Our Lord is accomplishing in the society and the culture but in our own life too.

When can we know that what is happening in our lives is part of his refining fire? When we experience what He experienced—rejection, ridicule, being treated unfairly, false condemnation, and being purposely isolated. He endured those things because He was setting the world on fire with his Word and Deeds. Jesus is telling us today—recognize what is really going on. Don't let yourself be swept up in the viewpoints of your culture. Believe that I am with you and my Spirit is renewing the face of the earth especially when it doesn't look like it at all. Dare to believe. Keep your eyes open. Allow the fire of His love to set your heart on fire.