

20th Sunday C; St. Paul, Ellicott City

I. Introduction

A. Dear friends, I know that the past weeks have been a very difficult time for the residents of Ellicott City - so I wanted to take the first opportunity I had to offer Mass here at St. Paul's since the recent flooding which, as you know, took two lives, injured others, and resulted in a tremendous destruction of property and infrastructure.

B. I was told that during the worst of the flooding, the parish evangelization center became a shelter and a place of refuge for many. Many of you volunteered to comfort and assist those most affected by the flooding. So please accept my warmest thanks for your neighborly kindness which is also a wonderful example of the Gospel hospitality. Let us remember in today's Mass those who died and those who still suffer, even as we ask God's blessings on efforts to rebuild those parts of town that suffered the heaviest damage.

C. In a strange sort of way, water and fire have something in common. Both are necessary for life and both can be very beneficial, when properly controlled and channeled. But, as we know only too well, water and fire can also be destructive when they are raging out of control. However, since today's Gospel speaks about lighting a fire, -and since I suspect you have had your fill of talking about flood waters- let's go with a brief reflection on what Jesus meant when he said that he came to light a fire upon the earth.

II. Bad Fires

A. There are, of course, bad fires and good fires. When I was a child, our car caught on fire at a busy intersection. As smoke billowed from under the hood, I thought it was all pretty interesting but mom pulled me out of the back seat to safety while dad ran to a nearby gas station to get a fire extinguisher.

B. In the same way, Jesus, the Good Shepherd wants to protect you and me from the destructive fires that can rage in our hearts – the fire of anger, smoldering resentment, the heat of passion, the fever of self-centeredness. These are fires Jesus didn't light and fires that the Holy Spirit seeks to douse – fires that cause us so much unhappiness and bring so much discord to our world.

III. Good Fires

A. The blaze that Jesus came to ignite by his death and resurrection was not a destructive fire but rather the fire of the Holy Spirit. By the light of Spirit's fire, we can see ourselves as we truly are – unlike the people in the first reading who punished the prophet Jeremiah because they preferred to be deluded about their true condition before God. By the fire of the Holy Spirit, our sins and failing can be burned – they can be consumed by the fire of that love which cannot coexist with sin; it is a fire that can separate us, divide us, from everyone and everything that is sinful. To be sure, it is painful when the Holy Spirit purifies us in this way – for sometimes we tend to cling to the sins that burden us and it takes a lot of courage for us to submit our sins to this consuming fire. The fire of the Holy Spirit also refines us, just as fire refines precious metal: it can cast out of faults and imperfections, so that we might more perfectly resemble Christ and his love.

B. There is one other way that the fire of the Holy Spirit functions: as we rise above the self-delusion and the burden of our sins, the Holy Spirit enkindles in our hearts genuine zeal for the Gospel – a burning desire to share the Good News of Jesus with others. This doesn't mean that we become zealots who drive everyone from the dinner table. It means, rather, that by word and example, we bear witness to the power, the freedom, and the joy that is ours as followers of Christ. In the language of Pope Francis, we become not just disciples, but missionary disciples who are capable of sharing our faith with others, including those who no longer practice the faith or who do so only occasionally.

IV. God's Grace and Our Cooperation

A. Notice that I have said that the fire of the Holy Spirit can cleanse us of our sins and can enkindle in us true zeal for the Gospel. I used that word “can” deliberately –

because not even God's efforts to cleanse us of sin, to purify our hearts, and to make us zealous disciples – will succeed without our consent and cooperation.

B. God will give us the help we need to cooperate but we need to give God our wholehearted and free consent to ignite or perhaps to re-ignite in our hearts the fire of the Holy Spirit. We do this by opening our hearts to him in prayer, by participating fully in the Mass, the Eucharist, and by an unburdening confession of our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In all of these ways, we invite into our hearts the fire of the Holy Spirit so that we can become not only disciples but disciples who spread the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit.

V. Conclusion

A. So in these difficult days and in difficult days to come or when you and I may be tempted to become lukewarm in our faith, or when we wonder how to live our vocation in the midst of so many challenges – whether it is marriage, or priesthood, or consecrated life – let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us be ablaze with that fire which is nothing other than the glory of God shining on the face of Christ.

B. And so we pray: “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send for your Spirit and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth!”

C. May God bless us and keep us always in his love!