

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 18, 2019

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

We find ourselves just past the middle of August, but for all intents and purposes, this Sunday pretty much brings an end to “summer vacation”. Most of our College-age young people are heading off to school in various locations across the U.S. to get ready for the Fall Semester, football/cheerleading/band camps are in high gear, and while public schools still have a couple more weeks of summer vacation left, most of our Catholic Schools all get back in the educational “groove” this week, or next. Where did the easy-going and relaxing summertime go? I have no idea!

But while we ponder that, one thing for sure is that the Readings we’ve just listened to for this 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time are not so “easy-going and relaxing”; in fact, they’re pretty challenging and demanding. In a particular way, the words of Jesus in the Gospel Reading we just heard may even be a little shocking. We think of Jesus as the Prince of Peace---as our loving, Good Shepherd----as the Savior of the world.....And, of course, He is!

But today, we heard Jesus saying: *“Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”* And then Jesus goes on to describe how following Him may lead to conflicts even among those closest to us in our lives: *“father divided against his son; a mother against her daughter.”* We might very well ask ourselves: What does this mean?

Let’s think back for a moment to those very first words of Jesus in today’s Gospel passage. He said: *“I have come to set the earth on fire.”* Jesus is the Word of God made Flesh. When God the Father sent Jesus, His only-begotten Son into the world, the world was forever changed. Jesus came to wage the ultimate battle against sin, evil and death on behalf of the whole human race, and certainly on our behalf. He did so, not thru the use of force, not by imposing salvation on anyone, but as a Gift, the result of pure Love, and only for us who use our free will to accept that Gift, or not. And, hopefully that is why we are here today---why we profess to be Catholics, and why we are followers of Jesus. In other words, every person has to choose: are we going to be on Jesus’ side---on the side of being His follower and living our lives according to Jesus’ teachings? Or not? There’s really no middle ground.

Even if we can agree that makes sense, we still might ask: why is Jesus talking about “divisions”, especially among those relationships that are most significant in our lives? Well, if everyone believes in the same things, there’s no problem. But if one person chooses not to follow Jesus, or perhaps doesn’t see the point in professing any kind of faith; while I choose to follow Jesus and want to live according to the Beatitudes, be faithful to the Commandments, and follow the teachings of the Church, that will more than likely lead to some differences of opinion between us, especially when it comes to basic daily decisions that have any kind of moral consequences or practical implications. And yet, it is critically important that each of us must make that extremely important choice: are we with Jesus, or not?

In addition to that basic choice, since Jesus’ primary intention, as we heard Him say, is to “set the earth on fire” with His Love, we also have to decide if we will allow ourselves to be “set on fire” with our Love for Jesus, or will we choose to be “cold” and “complacent” about our relationship with God, as well as about living according to God’s ways in our lives?

That image that Jesus uses---the image of “fire”----has both a destructive side to it, as well as a life-giving dimension to it. A raging fire, out of control and in the wrong circumstances can destroy our home, our property, our lives. But a controlled fire, can bring us warmth, can cook our food, and on a nice summer night, over a campfire, it can provide us with delicious “smares”!

We can use the image of “fire” to denote enthusiasm, or use it as an image of how well a first-place sports team is doing, saying that the team is “on fire”. And in a very beautiful way, “fire” is also an image to denote “human passion”---to describe two people who are “on fire” with love for one another.

That’s what Jesus’ Love has done for the world---He has set it, and those of us who follow Him, “on fire” with His Love, and we, in turn, are supposed to keep that flame burning in our hearts with a vibrant, and active faith.

How vibrant our faith is has to do with much more than if we come to Church every week, which of course, remains very important. Whether our faith is vibrant shows up in how we do the work at our daily jobs; in the ways that those of you who are parents teach the faith to and take care of your children; for all of our College-bound young people, it will show up in the way you handle the new experiences you’ll be having and the daily decisions you’ll need to make, which

have moral and spiritual consequences. Everyone of us wherever we are and whatever we are doing, give evidence, one way or another, how vibrant our faith is, and how strong our relationship with Jesus is. When we allow Jesus to “set us on fire” with a vibrant faith and a Love for Him in our lives, that will do more than anything else to change the world for goodness, and Truth, and the Peace the Jesus wants us to find in Him.

Jesus doesn't want division. He just knows that if some of us are with Him, and some of us are not, sadly, division will be the result. But the choice is far too important, with implications that involve our eternal salvation, to ignore, or pretend that it's not there. And that's what makes today's Readings challenging, because we have to know: are we with Jesus, or not?

Earlier this week we celebrated the beautiful Holyday of the Assumption of our Blessed Mother into Heaven; that holyday also served as our diocesan Day of Prayer for Peace and an End to Violence, in light of the increasing number of mass shootings throughout our country, three in very recent weeks. It was providential that we could observe that Day of Prayer for Peace in conjunction with a major Feast of Mary. From her Heavenly vantage point, our Blessed Mother's total focus is on helping each and every one of us to stay close to her Son, Jesus. She is constantly interceding for us----pleading our cause to her son Jesus. If you're experiencing divisions within your family, or going thru any crisis of faith, or not sure whether to follow Jesus or not----no matter where you currently are, stay close to our Blessed Mother. Pray to her. Pray the Rosary. Take all of your problems, worries, failures and concerns to her. She will not only give you the comfort that any Mother wants to give her beloved children, but she will help us--guide us---lead us to Jesus Who wants to free us from anything that “divides” us.

Today's Second Reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, gives us the best advice of all: *“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (the Communion of Saints in Heaven, and all of us who are part of the Body of Christ, the Church), let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us, and persevere in running the race that lies before us, while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.”* That's the key: having the support of family and friends who share our beliefs, persevering along our journey of faith, and, all the while, keeping our eyes on Jesus and our eternal Home!

May our coming to Mass each week, our strong devotion to our Blessed Mother, as well as the love, support and strength that we find in our families help

us to do that---to be “on fire” with our Faith, and keep us united with our Loving God here in this world, and in the life of the world to come.

God bless you, now and always!