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Homily

Jared D. Yogerst

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, obsculta@csbsju.edu

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This homily was given at Saint John's School of Theology Seminary on the occasion of midday prayer, October 20, 2011, in the Chapel of Mary, Mother of Our Redeemer, Emmaus Hall.

Grace, peace, mercy, and love to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

“I came to cast fire upon the earth!” This is such an odd statement. In the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus says that he did not come with peace but a *sword*. A little further on in today's reading Jesus says that his fire will divide families and communities. But, what is this fire that Jesus has brought?

The writer of Luke-Acts speaks of fire several times. In chapter 3 of the Gospel, John the Baptist foreshadows the coming of the Christ saying “He comes to baptize with fire and spirit.” Again in the Acts of the Apostles Luke describes the coming of the Spirit as ‘tongues of fire’ above the heads of the disciples in the upper room. Also in John's Revelation, chapter 4, the spirit of God is illustrated as seven burning lamp stands before the throne of God. I want to suggest to you today that this fire that Christ is bringing is in fact the Holy Spirit.

Christ's words to us today are said with a sense of urgency and care. His anxiety over his coming baptism (likely his agony at the cross) is bubbling up. At the start of this chapter Jesus is speaking about his second coming all the while knowing what he is about to endure at the cross.

I have read from physicians that the nails driven into Christ's wrists would have pierced the major nerve running the length of the arm. The ulnar nerve is very sensitive. If you have ever mistakenly bumped your elbow you have had a glimpse of the power this nerve has at expressing pain. Now, imagine, if you can, knowing full well that your entire life is running towards the terminus of an event at which nails will be driven into your flesh, an event at which not only your flesh having been torn, bruised, and bloodied but now your body will be affixed to a cross. The weight of your body suspended mainly on this nerve. So, all of this to draw out why Jesus would say in verse 50 that he was anxious for the coming ‘baptism’, which would be a baptism – or a washing – in considerable and unimaginable pain and sorrow. The loss of the intimacy he had with the Father, the violence and violation of divorce, dejection, and death. All of this time Jesus is being driven by the Holy Spirit and the strength to seek after the will of the Father. The same spirit indwelling in him, the same Spirit at Pentecost, and the one each of us received by faith; this is the fire that Christ came to kindle. **But OH that it were already blazing!**

A fire destroys, that's a given. Anyone who has experienced a house fire or has burned a Styrofoam cup knows this. But what I want you to leave with today is an understanding that this all-consuming fire, this conflagration, is also one of purification. In Jeremiah 23:29 the prophet writes, “‘Is not my word like fire,’ declares the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that shatters rock?’” But God's word is not only a fire that destroys but it is also a fire that purifies. The prophet Isaiah writes of the purification by fire. After declaring his unrighteousness to see the LORD, the seraphim come to him, touching his mouth with the coal from the altar of burnt offering. This purification will also bring division. In John 7:7 Jesus states that the world hates the message he has come to preach. A message of the renunciation of the world turning all we take for granted on its head. Later on in Luke 9 Jesus declares that those who are ashamed of the Son of Man in this life, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of. Paul, in 1st Thessalonians, calls this shame a “quenching of the Spirit.” Christ came to set the world a flame, what have we done to feed that fire? Or have we quenched it?

What is the state of that fire within you? What is the state of that fire at the School of Theology? Are we ablaze for the Lord? Would that the Spirit set all in this place ablaze.

Jared Yogerst is an Masters of Divinity graduate from Bethel Seminary who came to Saint John's School of Theology Seminary in the spring of 2011. He is completing his Master of Theology focusing on a sacramental approach to married relationships. Jared will be starting doctoral studies at Luther Seminary in the fall of 2012. Jared and his wife, Candace, have a dog, Holly, who enjoys going along with them on camping and fishing trips in Wisconsin.