



Some reflections inspired by online copyrighted commentaries and homilies

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Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Fire is an image that Jesus uses in today's gospel. But what does he mean when he says, "I have come to set the earth on fire?" How does fire connect to Jesus' mission? Now usually when we think about fire, we think about heat or light, or even destruction. But fire can also be power—the power to change things.

About a million years ago, our human ancestors first discovered how to use and control fire. They probably saw fire begin from a lightning strike and figured out how to ignite it again with sparks and kindling. The discovery of fire was real power, power to change history. Now for the first time, humans controlled their own heat and could choose to live in colder climates. Now for the first time, humans could cook their food, which provided higher nutrition and probably spurred the development of the human brain. Fire is power: the power to change.

It is in this sense that Jesus uses fire in today's gospel. Jesus sees his mission as a mission to ignite a fire that will bring about change. And what Jesus is trying to change is important. Jesus seeks to change the world. He says, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it was already blazing." You see, all too often as we approach our faith, we think too small. We imagine that Jesus has come to change our hearts, or to help us with some personal addiction, or to make us better people. Of course, Jesus wants to do all those things. But his vision is much larger. Jesus wants a new world, a world whose structures no longer support greed, hatred, and violence. Jesus wants our world to become the Kingdom of God. Therefore, Jesus' message is not so much inspirational as it is revolutionary. Not so much spiritual as evolutionary. Jesus wants the world to change. That is why he has come to set the earth on fire.

Now following this larger vision of Jesus is not easy. We can imagine what it is to be kind to our neighbor, to contribute to the poor at Christmas, or to forgive a family member who has hurt us. But how do we build a new world? How do we attack war, poverty, and injustice? Envisioning that kind of a mission is more difficult to imagine and to accomplish.

But Jesus calls us to it. That is why if we are to be his disciples, it is not sufficient only to be good people and come to church. We have to feel the pain of this world and seek to end it. We have to recognize the abuse of our environment and work to correct it. We have to become involved in our political process to elect candidates of integrity, vision, and a commitment to the common good.

Jesus wants his gospel to change the world. That is a huge mission. But Christians continue to believe that it is possible. We continue to hope. That hope was expressed by the Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin, who wrote, "Someday, after mastering the winds and the waves and the tides and gravity, we will harness for God the energies of love. Then, for the second time in the history of the world, humans will have discovered fire".

A Reflection by Fr. George M Smiga