

The Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10
<i>Response</i>	Lord, come to my aid!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 40:2, 3, 4, 18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 12:1-4
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord; I know them, and they follow me.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 12:49-53

The 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of Luke in Year C, and here we come to one of those sayings of Jesus that is (I think, for many people) very puzzling. It's a strange saying because we think of Jesus as being...well we don't just think of him as the Prince of Peace, elsewhere in the Bible he's described as the Prince of Peace, and yet in this passage for today's gospel, Jesus says that he doesn't come to bring peace but rather division. So let's look at the gospel together and see if we can unpack its meaning. In Luke 12:49-53, Jesus says these words:

“I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”¹

Alright, so that's the end of the gospel there and a number of questions arise. First, what is this fire that Jesus says he's come to cast upon the earth? Is he talking about literal fire, spiritual fire; what exactly is he referring to? Second, what is the bap-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

tism with which he has to be baptized? And why is he in anguish until it's accomplished, or constrained until it's accomplished? Third, what does he mean, "he didn't come to bring peace on earth but rather division"? I mean if you think (especially nowadays) about the picture of Jesus that is the most prominent picture, people today tend to focus on Jesus' teaching about love of neighbor, love of enemies, turning the other cheek, judge not lest ye be judged; so the elements of Jesus' teaching that are more pacific, meaning peaceful (in a sense of focusing on peace, bringing peace), focusing on love of neighbor, those are the things that people still find acceptable, even in a secular modern context. So we don't usually think of Jesus as describing his mission as not coming to bring peace, but instead coming to bring division. So what does he mean by that? How do you reconcile that with other passages in the New Testament that describe Jesus as the Prince of Peace or as being our peace, as bringing peace (like Ephesians 2 where it says that Christ tore down the wall of division between the Jews and the Gentiles, between Israel and the nations). And then finally (I always laugh at this one too,) the ending of the verse there, because Jesus says he came to set a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. I always kind of laugh and think, well, did Jesus really need to come into the world to set daughters-in-law against mothers-in-law? I'm not so sure about that one. I think that one was already underway. Anyway, sorry. It is an odd expression, like why does Jesus list all these specific relationships within the household?

So let's walk through it and we'll kind of try to answer them. Although, two caveats: first, this is a cryptic passage. It's a very mysterious passage, so there are still some aspects of it that are a little obscure. Second, and more important, I wrote my dissertation on this passage. Not just in Luke's gospel, but in the Gospel of Matthew, so there's a lot that I would like to say here that I'm just not going to be able to get to, so I'll just try to give you a couple of highlights, but I spent a lot of time thinking about this text in particular. So the first thing I would say is that when it comes to fire, the images of fire and water...so he talks about casting fire upon the earth, and then having a baptism with which he's going to be baptized. So just thinking in terms of a 1st Century Jewish context, when Jesus mentions fire and water, this was a pretty standard Jewish theme in apocalyptic Jewish writings (prophetic writings), but also books outside of the Bible (from Jewish writings known as the *Pseudepigrapha*), which were frequently descriptions of what would happen at the end of time, what would happen when the Messiah came. They're called apocalypses.

And if you look at Jewish apocalyptic literature, there's a pretty standard theme of coupling fire and water with the two destructions of the world. So in Jewish eschatology (which is the doctrine of the end), it was pretty widely believed (not universally, but widely believed) that God had destroyed the world the first time at the time of Noah through water, through the great flood in Genesis 6 and 9, but that at the end of time, or at the end of the age, whenever God would destroy the world again in order to make it new for the new creation, that he would not destroy it with water but rather he would destroy it with fire. If you look at the New Testament, when it describes the end of the world in 2 Peter 3, it says "the heavens and the earth will be dissolved with fire". So this image of water and fire, of destruction by flood and then destruction by fire, is not just standard Jewish eschatology, it's also the teaching of the New Testament. It's standard Christian Eschatology that in the Second Coming the world will be cleansed by fire and not by flood. So maybe you can use that to put your kids to bed at night if you ever want to comfort them.

In any case, back to the gospel here. Jesus takes those two standard Jewish images of eschatological judgment and he personalizes them, he links them with his own personal mission. So he says I have come to cast fire upon the earth and I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and both of them he's longing to take place. So he wants the fire to be kindled and he wants the baptism to be accomplished. So what's he referring to there? Well, in this case the fire image is a little more cryptic but the baptismal imagery is really clear, because elsewhere in the gospels Jesus refers to his crucifixion as his baptism. So for example, if you look at Mark 10:38-39 (just a quick parallel here), you might recall in Mark 10:36, James and John tell Jesus, "hey, can we sit at your right and your left hand in your kingdom when you come into your glory?" And in v. 38 it says, "But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' And they said to him, 'We're able.' And Jesus said to them, the cup I drink you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right or my left hand is not mine to grant." So, if you keep reading Mark's gospel it's really clear that he drinks the cup of suffering in his Passion and in his Death.

So baptism here is an image for being immersed in the waters of suffering on Calvary, on the cross. So baptism is a water metaphor for Jesus' crucifixion and death. And again, that might seem a little strange to you. Like if I think about water, I might think of a glass of water. Water is something that gives life. But again, being from South Louisiana, having experienced lots of hurricanes and floods, and if

you've experienced them yourself, you'll know that water is also something that can kill easily, especially if there's a flood of water, or if you're immersed in water and you don't know how to swim or you can't breathe. You can die very quickly by drowning. And that's actually what the word *baptitso* means; it means to be immersed or submerged in water. So here, Jesus is describing, if you look at the parallel in the gospel of Mark there, it appears he's describing his anxiety, his desire for his crucifixion to take place. Not because he longs for the suffering, but because he's anxious for the salvation that will come through his suffering. He's not anxious for the baptism (the flood), but he's anxious for the cleansing of sin that the flood (that the baptism of his death) will bring about, which is exactly what it's going to do.

I'll come back to the fire in just a minute, but for now you already can get a sense of here, or an echo I should say, of the teaching of John the Baptist, because remember back in the earlier sections of the gospels, John says "I baptize you with water, but there is one coming after me who is greater than I whose thong of his sandal I'm not worthy to untie, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." If you were Jesus' original 1st Century audience, if you're his disciple and you hear him talking about casting fire on the world and having a baptism, you might think of the flood and fire of the final judgment. That would be one association. You might also think of the cleansing fire that John the Baptist talked about, the water of John's baptism and then the fire that the Messiah would bring, this eschatological fire. Which, fire always functions in the prophets (well, ordinarily functions) as a symbol of judgment, because fire has the ability to kill and to cause pain, but also as a symbol of purification. It's the cleansing fire. So both water and fire do the same thing, they can cleanse and they can kill. They can cause pain, but they can also make things new. Fire has the power to purify precious metals. If you don't have a fire, you can't purge the silver or the gold of any of the defects that it needs to have so that it can be purified or tested by fire. Anyway, so that's what's going on, that's what swirling around behind these otherwise cryptic words of Jesus.

And then the third thing he says is, "Do you think I've come to give peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather, division." And the Greek word there for division means division, divided; *diamerismos*, to kind of cut things into portions or to divide into parts. And in this case, he focuses on divisions within families, within a household. So he says, "I tell you, rather division. In one house there will be five divided: three against two, two against three." And then he goes and lists all the

different relationships. Now, you don't have to know anything about Judaism or about the Old Testament to know that what he's saying here is "I'm going to pit family members against one another." And even just through a reading of the gospel you can see how this might play out. In an earlier video we saw Jesus tell a young man, "Leave the dead to bury their dead" when he asked if he could go back and bury his father. I mean, talk about a division. If he had left his family and followed Jesus and failed to attend his own father's funeral (failed to bury his own father), what do you think the effect of that action would be with his brothers, his sister, his mother? How would they feel about the cost of that man's discipleship and how it affected their family? Well obviously, that would be a serious point of division between the young man that Jesus was calling to discipleship and his family. So, even if you just know about the way Jesus calls people to come and follow him and the kind of effect that might have on their families, you can pick up on the meaning here of what Jesus means. In other words, "my mission is not going to bring a state of earthly peace to the households of everyone who becomes my disciple. In fact, because some people are going to refuse the call and others will accept, I'm actually going to bring division into this world."

So I think that's kind of a plain sense of the text. I think most people can just pick up on that and infer that from reading it. However, as always is the case with Jesus, there's always something more going on here. Whenever Jesus says something strange or weird, like "I'm going to set father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law", when he says something that seems odd, oftentimes he'll be alluding to an Old Testament text. And of course, in this case, that's exactly what he's doing. In fact, he's not just alluding, he's actually quoting from a prophecy of the book of Micah. Now it would have been really cool if this prophecy were the 1st reading for today's mass because then you'd actually be able to see it more clearly, but it's not. There's a different reading for today. And I'm in sales, I'm not in management, so I don't get to decide which passages go in the lectionary for the day. But I will take you back, nevertheless, to the book of Micah 7. So that's where this passage comes from that Jesus is quoting. Micah 7 is a prophecy of the coming age of salvation, and as I explored in my dissertation, it's a picture of the fact that over and over again, the prophets would say, before the age of salvation began, there would be a time of tribulation, there would be a time of trial. There would be a time of testing and division within the people of Israel.

The Greek word they'll use for this time of testing and tribulation is actually often *peirasmos*. We actually saw that in an earlier video looking at the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into *peirasmos* (temptation, testing, trial)". That Greek word can be used to refer to the final tribulation that would take place before the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment. So this theme of tribulation before salvation, division before restoration, is a standard expectation in the prophets. And here Jesus is quoting Micah's prophecy of tribulation and division that precedes the age of salvation. So this is what Micah the prophet says. This is Micah 7:6-7 and then I'll skip down to v. 12 and 15. Micah says this:

for the son treats the father with contempt,
the daughter rises up against her mother,
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
a man's enemies are the men of his own house.
But as for me, I will look to the Lord,
I will wait for the God of my salvation;
my God will hear me.

So pause there. What Micah's doing is he's describing this time of tribulation and strife within Israel, in which Israel will be so divided that it will cut through even down to the family itself, and that a person's enemies are going to be the members of his own household. But the prophet says, "I'm still going to wait on the Lord for God to bring his salvation", and if you keep reading, that is what's described next. In v. 12 it actually says:

In that day they will come to you,
from Assyria to Egypt,
and from Egypt to the River...

As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt
I will show them marvelous things.

I've talked about this before in other videos, but remember the hope for the ingathering of the exiles and the lost ten tribes of Israel? How the Jews were waiting for the ten lost tribes that had been scattered among the nations to come back together, to be reunited and to come back to the Promised Land in a new exodus that would be inaugurated by the Messiah? Remember that? We've talked about it elsewhere. You can see it in Isaiah 11, or Jeremiah 23, or Ezekiel 36 and 37. It's all over the prophets. What Micah's describing here is that he's saying that before the new ex-

odus takes place, before the ingathering of the twelve tribes of Israel and the coming of the kingdom, before that happens, there's going to be a time of division. There's going to be a time of tribulation. There's going to be a time of strife and a time of judgment. And a prophet is called to endure through that time of tribulation and make it to the day of salvation. And the image he gives for the tribulation is "father against son, daughter against mother, and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law." In other words, members of a household. So what does Jesus do? He says, don't think that I've come to bring peace. I didn't come to bring peace. I came to bring division. For a man's enemies are going to be members of his own household. Father's going to be set against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. In other words, "I'm going to fulfill the prophecy of Micah. I'm going to unleash the tribulation and the time of division that will precede the coming of the kingdom of God." In other words, what Jesus is saying is, "There's not going to be any salvation without tribulation first. There's not going to be any kingdom of peace without a time of division first. I have to cast a fire of judgment upon the world and go through the waters of the cross before we can reach the resurrection." Does that make sense? There's no resurrection without a cross. There's no kingdom without tribulation. There's no restoration without division. He's correcting an overly optimistic eschatology, or expectation that his disciple might be thinking. They might be thinking, "Hey, one day the kingdom's just going to come down from heaven, all is going to be peace, all will be well, it's just going to be peace, and love, and brotherhood of men, and fatherhood of God that's going to spread throughout the world." And Jesus is saying, "That's not how it happens. I've got to go through the baptism of the cross first, and I'm anxious for it to be accomplished." Because what Jesus is effectively doing in the cross is taking that tribulation upon himself, and through his suffering he's going to unleash the power and the glory of the kingdom of God in this world and in the world to come.

So anyway, that's what he's going on at there. Okay, I'll stop there. Let's go back to the Old Testament quickly. If you go to Jeremiah 38, the Church here (in the lectionary) has given us a very brief selection. I would highly encourage you to read the entire chapter (Jeremiah 38) on your own. It will just give you a sense of the story. For our purposes here we just want to focus on the fact that this is an account of the prophet Jeremiah, who's speaking in the 6th Century BC, right around the time of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Babylonians. And one of Jeremiah's main prophetic missions was to preach judgment against the people of his day because of their sins. And he was proclaiming that the Temple was going to be destroyed, and you can imagine that that drummed up some opposition. Not

everybody liked Jeremiah or his message of coming judgment. And so one of the ways you respond to a prophet who is preaching judgment is to kill him and to shut him up so that he'll be quiet and the people won't be alarmed. And in this case, that's what happens to Jeremiah. There's an attempt to execute him by throwing him into a cistern. So Jeremiah 38 says this:

Then the princes said to the king, "Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." King Zedeki'ah said, "Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against you." So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchi'ah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mire, and Jeremiah sank in the mire.

Then it skips down to verse 8:

E'bed-mel'ech went from the king's house and said to the king, "My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern; and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." Then the king commanded E'bed-mel'ech, the Ethiopian, "Take three men with you from here, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies."

So that's the end of the text. Okay, so why did the Church choose this reading? It's a little obscure, but the basic parallel that you can see there is that just as Jesus says that his prophetic mission is not going to be accepted by everybody and it's going to bring division and a time of strife and judgment, so too we see that Jeremiah the prophet also brought strife and division between the people of Israel, which resulted in him not being baptized in terms of crucifixion, but him being immersed in the mire of this cistern in which they were trying to put him to death. So that's the basic parallel there between the persecution of Jeremiah and the time that Jesus is talking about.

And so the Psalm for today (the responsorial psalm, that's the bridge between these two) is one of the psalms of deliverance in which the psalmist actually cries out to God and gives praise to God for drawing him up from the pit. So in Psalm 40:1-2 it says:

I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
 out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
 making my steps secure.

And then it goes on to praise God as being his help and his deliverer. So just as Jeremiah was rescued by the intervention of God from the pit, so the psalmist, who isn't actually in a pit but who's using the metaphor of being immersed in a pit and caught in the mire as a metaphor for his suffering, is delivered from his suffering by the Lord (his deliverer), so too Jesus (the prophet, the new Jeremiah so-to-speak) is going to be immersed in the waters of his crucifixion and death, but that's not going to be the end of the story. The story doesn't end with tribulation. It doesn't end with division. It ends with the resurrection. It ends with deliverance. It ends with the coming of the kingdom of God, and that's the kind of ultimate goal, that's the ultimate end there. So that's how the readings for today fit together. It's about trusting the Lord even in time of trial and strife.

Okay, so what does that mean for us? There are two quotations here from the living tradition of the Church (from the Early Church Fathers) that I think help kind of flesh out the meaning of this cryptic and mysterious passage for us today. The first is from St. Cyril of Jerusalem. St. Cyril of Jerusalem was the bishop of the Church of Jerusalem in the 4th Century AD. So he's a really great witness to ancient Christian beliefs. And if you ever wanted to read the Church Fathers, I'll often tell my students to start with St. Cyril of Jerusalem and his lectures on the sacraments, because first of all, they're just fascinating, but also, unlike some of the other Church Fathers, St. Cyril is not as philosophical in his language so he can be a little easier to read sometimes. In any case, in one of his lectures (his catechetical lectures that he was giving to people who were coming into the church) he actually explains the passage that we have in our gospel for today. And this is what he said. I'm going to quote St. Cyril:

For [John the Baptist] says, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He that cometh after me," and the rest; "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire."

And St. Cyril picks up and says:

But wherefore with fire? Because the descent of the Holy Ghost was in fiery tongues; concerning which the Lord says joyfully, "I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled?" (Luke 12:49)²

So notice here what St. Cyril is doing. He's saying that the fire that Jesus was desiring to cast upon the earth is the fire of the Holy Spirit that will come after Jesus' Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into heaven, from which he will send the Holy Spirit in tongues as of fire at Pentecost. So Cyril there is making a profound statement about the world being set on fire, not by a literal flame that's going to burn up the material elements of the world, but rather by the flames of the Holy Spirit that will set the world on fire for the gospel. And you can see there's a real truth here that Jesus will mention elsewhere in the gospels (like in the gospel of John), his desire to send the Paraclete, to send the spirit. The disciples say, "Why do you have to leave us?" And in the Gospel of John it says, "It is better that I go, because if I don't go, then I won't send the Paraclete who will come to you and lead you into all truth." So Cyril connects the fire that Jesus is longing to cast on the earth with the fire of Pentecost (basically), which is a fascinating interpretation because then what Jesus is talking cryptically about is the baptism of his Passion and Death, and then the fire of Pentecost; the son and the Holy Spirit, there are two missions in the world. That's one interpretation from St. Cyril.

Another interpretation comes to us from St. Ambrose of Milan. St. Ambrose was the bishop of Milan, a Latin-speaking Church Father in the 4th Century who played a key role in the conversion of St. Augustine. And in St. Ambrose's *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, this is what Ambrose says:

Are we to believe that he has commanded discord within families?... He does not say that a father is to be rejected by his children, but that God is to be set before all...

Alright, so pause here. Notice, Ambrose is dealing with a potential objection to Jesus' statement that "I came to bring division in families". I mean, don't the Ten Commandments say "honor your father and mother"? How can you reconcile that with Jesus' statement here? Is Jesus a home wrecker? In other words, is his mission to cause strife and division? To cause children to dishonor their parents? "No," Ambrose says. But this is what he's saying (and he picks up):

² Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 17.8; trans. NPNF2 7.126

You are not forbidden to love your parents, but you are forbidden to prefer them to God. Natural children are true blessings from the Lord, and no one must love the blessing that he has received more than God by whom the blessing, once received, is preserved.”³

I bring that up because a number of friends and family that I know are converts to the Catholic faith. They’ve either converted to Catholicism from no particular Christian tradition at all, or they’ve come in to full communion with the Catholic Church from another tradition (like a Protestant or other Christian tradition). And if you’ve ever gone through a conversion or you know someone who has, you’ll know that it can cause a great deal of pain. One of the most difficult aspects can often be the division that it causes within families. I’ve talked to a number of women who are married, who have become Catholic but their husbands haven’t come along. Or they are practicing Catholics and their husbands don’t attend Church. And this is a source of deep, deep, pain. And you can imagine a situation where (let’s say) a young adult (maybe a teenager; seventeen, eighteen) wants to become a Christian or become a Catholic (enter into the Catholic Church), but their parents may not be Christian or their parents may not be a Catholic, and the questions becomes: “Well wait. Whom do I obey? Is it dishonoring my father and mother to follow God and enter the Christian faith or enter into the Catholic Church?” And what Ambrose is saying here is that although all children are called to honor their parents, by means of this saying, Jesus is making clear that we cannot prefer any family member (father, mother, daughter-in-law, whatever it might be) to God.

God has ultimate precedence, and discipleship to Jesus takes precedence over all other things. And because that’s the case, because the demands of discipleship are so high, Jesus is just being realistic here; that “my mission isn’t going to bring peace on the earth, it’s going to end up bringing division.” And that division is going to slice right through the very hearts of households and families and married couples as people have to decide whether to give their primary allegiance to spouses, parents, or children, or whether they give their primary allegiance to Jesus and to God. And in this case Jesus is really clear that that allegiance comes first to him. I mean, as he says elsewhere in the gospel, “He who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” And that’s a negative way of saying that love of God takes precedent over all other things. And so, especially if you happen to

³ Ambrose, *Exposition on the Gospel of Luke* 7.134-36; trans. T. Tomkinson [adapted]

know someone who's going through that, please pray for them because the difficulty of that kind of familial division is very painful and very real, but it's part of what Christ calls his disciples to as he proclaims the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God.