

Fire and Baptism of our Lord

Dearly Beloved in Christ,

Our Lord commanded us in last Sunday's gospel to be prepared at all times for the hour that he would come – the hour we do not expect (Luke 12:40). Then he summed this up by reminding us that, "Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more" (Luke 12:48).

This Sunday, in the gospel, our Lord takes us to a deeper level into the mystery of his life. He said clearly, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" And in almost breathless urgency, he said, "There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!"

What are the fire and baptism our Lord speaks about? How do these tie in with the story of Jeremiah and what is the message for us this week? The fire that the Lord comes to cast on earth is the fire of love and purification. It is the fire that both cauterizes and enlightens. The Old Testament antecedent that gives insight into the type of fire the Lord brings is the prophecy about the coming of the "Messenger of the covenant" and the Messiah. I shall quote this at length:

Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me; And suddenly there will come to the temple the Lord whom you seek, And the messenger of the covenant who you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who will survive the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner's fire, or like fuller's lye. (Malachi 3:1-2).

The purifying and cleansing aspect of fire are brought to the foreground in this prophecy. The message here is that our Lord came to bring out the best in us just as dross is removed by fire so that pure gold and silver can emerge. Clarifying the image of fire in this context, Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "When Jesus talks about fire, he means in the first place his own Passion, which was a Passion of love and was therefore a fire; the new burning bush, which burns and is not consumed; a fire that is to be handed on."¹ Furthermore, the Holy Father indicated that, "This is a fire that makes things bright and pure and free and grand. Being a Christian, then, is daring to entrust oneself to this burning fire"². This is why it holds that, "The message of the Church is there precisely in order to conflict with our bad behavior, to tear man out of his life of lies and to bring clarity and truth. Truth makes demands, and it also burns."³

Now let us turn to the other image – Baptism. The baptism of the Lord is his crucifixion and death for the salvation of the world. Long before the Lord Jesus accomplished this, the prophecy of old pointed out this path of the Lord's atoning suffering in an intriguing way, "He was pierced for our sins and crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole; by his wounds we were healed" (Isaiah 53:5). That is the heart of the baptism of the Lord. He made

¹ Pope Benedict XVI. "Christ the Burning Fire." In *God and the World* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002) p. 222

² Ibidem.

³ Pope Benedict XVI. "Christ the Burning Fire." In *God and the World* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002) p. 222-223.

this clear to James and John, the two brothers who wanted places of honor in God's kingdom. He said to them, "Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"(Mark 10:38). In other words, to share in the glory of the Lord involves sharing in his sufferings. Hence, we can say that our Lord's baptism in the river Jordan is an anticipation of the baptism of his crucifixion, death and resurrection. "In his baptism our Lord loaded the burden of all mankind's guilt upon his shoulder; bore it down to the depth of the Jordan. He inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross."⁴

How can we then understand the seemingly hard saying of our Lord when he said that he came not to bring peace but division? The fire he brings is refining and purifying fire, it separates the gold from the dross, the real from the unreal. In this sense, Jeremiah's plight is a typical example of how truth can cause division or even cost one's life. He spoke the word of God and because of this, he was thrown into the well to die. We can then see the reason why the Lord said that he did not come to bring peace but division, "From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." He was quoting Micah chapter 7, verse 6. This was the case during, that time in history. People were so secular, faithless and unreliable that one could not be sure of even one's closest relations and family members. Now how does this apply to us today?

In our day, it does happen that as parents you sent your children to Catholic School and you made sure that they did their first communion and confirmation but once they turned eighteen and left home, they left the Church as well. They don't want to hear anything about God and Church. If you insist in confronting them with their loss of faith, then they would avoid you. Another instance, have you ever been called Jesus freaks or overbearing because you speak out the truth? Have you ever been in a situation where you offered to help and someone asked where do you go to Church? And when you said St Augustine or I am Catholic, the conversation went dead. Have you ever been attacked because you are a believer or because you are prolife or called too traditional? If you have had this experience or any other like it, then what the Lord said has come to pass in you. What do you do then? You do not give up. "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12). Have you ever watched a documentary that accused the Church of being the cause of all problems and backwardness in the world or especially among our people? Think also of the fact that the work City of God, the masterpiece of St Augustine our patron saint was primarily written to defend the Church against the charge that it caused the fall of Roman empire. Being a disciple of Christ does not give room for neutrality. You are either for the Lord or against him.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, (Citta del Vaticano: Lbreria Editrice, 2007), p.18)