

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

It's not uncommon these days, when journalists interview people, for example, to ask them "What's your passion?"

And the responses could be any number of things: a passion to be recognized as the best at something, a passion to create something new, a passion to serve perhaps.

Passion brings with it a dynamism. I can't recall anyone ever saying, "I have a passion for trying to keep things just as they are, with as little change as possible."

Today's gospel presents Jesus at his most passionate. He's not simply a do-gooder who tries to get along with everybody.

He's trying to accomplish something, is encountering resistance and hardship, but has not lost his passion. "How I wish it [the fire] were already blazing."

These are not the measured words of someone following a game plan.

This is an impassioned outburst; the eruption of Jesus' heart that makes known what drives him.

He's a man on a mission and his is impatient for it to be accomplished.

In fact, the drive to finish is causing him inner anguish. It seems the fire he wants to cast on the earth is also inside him as a propelling force.

Jeremiah had a similar experience. He once wrote, "Then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."

The fire has been placed there by God for divine purposes and is beyond Jeremiah's control.

These images also are connected with the experience of the Spirit.

We might be inclined to forget that John the Baptist predicted that the one who was to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

In its deepest sense, receiving the Holy Spirit at baptism and confirmation means both a purification and empowerment.

We receive the Holy Spirit to purify us but also to make us fit for the mission God has in store for us.

That mission goes beyond concerns for our own personal salvation. It includes also as an essential element to be passionate about the state of the world and what we can do about it.

This will cost us. There will be pushback, and even more than pushback.

We will have to avoid the temptation to pull back at the first sign of conflict.

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The Gospel, by its nature, requires a decision. As people decide, they divide. They may decide against us.

Or what's worse, we who call ourselves Christians can be the ones who put up resistance when another of us catches fire from the gospel and calls us to account.

That also has happened in the past. No one was interested in hearing what Jeremiah had to say. In fact, they thought his preaching was doing more harm than good.

But Jeremiah had it right. His was God's authentic prophetic messenger.

We have all received the Spirit which purifies and empowers.

We pray today that we might continue to be open to that purifying action, so that self-interest and a fear of conflict or change does not deafen us to the call of Gospel.

We have need of the passion that saves which comes from God, and we recognize that the work begun in Christ has not yet been fully accomplished.

We commit ourselves to the work that Christ has given us to do, and pray that it will contribute to the mission of God's peace and reconciliation he inaugurated.