

The Thirteenth Man

Homily for Sunday August 14th 2022
20th Sunday Ordinary Time

Every Sunday we pray at Mass the Creed where we affirm we believe in the Communion of Saints. Today's reading from Hebrews speaks of this communion as a cloud of witnesses who are cheering us on as we run the race of faith to the finish line. To believe that there is this invisible – to us – multitude that is on our side to encourage and inspire us is a theme worth pondering today. The writer of this letter wants us to shed those sins that keep us from running lightly and to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as we run this race with a godly perseverance.

So what I want to do now is consider with you what is the sin that can clings so close and hinders us in the race of faith; and how do we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus?

To answer both these questions I want to turn to the Gospel reading appointed for today. Here are words that can be difficult for us to understand. What does Jesus mean when he says he has come to bring fire on the earth and division, not peace?

First we need to understand that the fire Jesus is speaking about is a refining fire that is to purify, just as a precious metal is melted and refined by the red hot heat. The fire that Jesus will kindle is associated with his baptism, which he will undergo on the Cross. We too in our own way engage in the battle and as we do so it can refine our faith and help us to grow in holiness.

It is on the cross that Jesus will go to war with those forces that is the sin that clings so closely to us. Because of this, Jesus says he has come not to bring peace but division. In order to understand this it is helpful to know there are two kinds of peace.

There is the peace that this world gives, and Jesus explicitly says to his Apostles that he did not come to give them that kind of peace. What kind of peace does the world give? Well, at its best, it is a peace that puts an end to war, at least temporarily, by some kind of treaty or compromise. It's the kind of peace you don't need any kind of religious faith at all to want, and to work for, and sometimes to attain. The commonest cause of this kind of peace is power: winning a war and enforcing the peace. Think about the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War 1. Peace was established but it was fragile and temporary, as 20 years later World War II would fracture the peace negotiated in 1919. Even more importantly the peace of the world is not a peace of mind, heart, and soul. It is just an external, pragmatic peace, a cessation from external violence, and its most usual and effective agent is the external violence of winning a war.

Internally, the peace that Jesus did not come to bring is the peace with our spiritual enemies, which are the world, the flesh, and the devil. He came to make war on these enemies. It is these enemies that is the sins that clings so closely, as we read in Hebrews.

What are these three enemies? "The world" is not the planet—that's God's good creation, and he himself declared it good—but the culture, the manmade civilizations, the world order that rewards not virtue but cleverness and power and punishes not sin but nonconformity to its ways,

including religious nonconformity. Christianity has always been countercultural in some important ways, even in a nominally Christian culture, and absolutely has to be today when we are living in a culture that is no longer Christian and is increasingly becoming anti-Christian because it encourages greed, lust, and pride as the ways to success and happiness. It is certainly not a culture that understands or rewards the virtues of poverty, especially spiritual poverty, which requires detachment from riches; or chastity, which is simply sneered at; or humility, which it confuses with servility; or meekness, which it confuses with weakness.

Our second enemy, the flesh, is not the body, which God invented, but the whole of our fallen, selfish, and weak human nature, soul as well as body. Our selfishness corrupts everything good, especially our passions and desires. We love our own pleasure rather than other people, and not only sexually—that's only the most obvious and passionate form. We use other selves to serve our own happiness rather than using ourselves to serve theirs. The lust of the flesh can be described as an inordinate love for sensual pleasures, an unwholesome curiosity and love of the goods of the earth.

Our third enemy is the devil. We experience his tempting voice within us, seductively suggesting ways we can satisfy our basic cravings. We have an awareness of an active agent bent on drawing us into what we realize is wrong, a subtle whispering in our ear. We need to remember that the devil is real and that he is much more formidable than our invention of the cartoon character with horns and hooves and red tights.

Greed is the special sin that the world tempts us to. Lust is the special sin that the flesh tempts us to. Pride is the special sin that the devil tempts us to, and it is the worst sin of all because it is spiritual and is not a sin of weakness but of arrogance.

Jesus came to bring peace with God, not the devil; with ourselves, our true selves, not our foolish flesh; and with our neighbors, not with the world order that so often pits us against our neighbors. Jesus came to make war against the devil because the devil is at war with God. Jesus came to make war against the flesh because the flesh is at war with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. And Jesus came to make war against the world because the world is at war with the Church, which is the communion of saints. So much so that in every culture saints are martyred, whether in red or in black and white, whether in blood or in print.¹

Now when we understand the nature of Jesus' war and why he says he did not come to bring peace, it can help us make sense of the rest of this passage and teach us what it means to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Jesus says, the writer to the Hebrews, endured the Cross, despising its shame. In other words, throughout the whole of his earthly life Jesus had to contend with the world, the flesh and the devil. Jesus faced such hostility because he would not compromise with these forces that are so opposed to God. So says Hebrews will we, and it will affect the most formative relationships in our lives that is the family. This is why Hebrews invites us to keep our

¹ Kreeft, Peter. Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle C) (p. 604). Word On Fire. Kindle Edition.

eyes fixed on Jesus, whose own relatives thought him mad. How challenging it can be when members of our own family do not understand our faith and how central it is to our lives.

And this is where we want to remember that cloud of witnesses, our family in Christ cheering us on as we contend with the world, the flesh and the devil. Hebrews makes clear that the contest is for real but calls us to not grow weary and lose heart.

When we say the Creed and affirm that we believe in the Communion of Saints, hear them cheering, and calling us onward in this race where Jesus is out in front, saying don't give up, carry on to the finish line.