

Encountering God offers peace. It can also be disruptive.

A Gospel Reflection from Brian Wigger

This weekend's gospel is one of those difficult gospels that has a way of catching us by surprise here on a quiet summer weekend, when out of nowhere, probably when we are hoping for some lighter content, we hear a frustrated Jesus that we barely recognize.

Having reminded the apostles and the crowd that facing the coming judgment takes patience, Jesus now goes on to speak of how difficult it will be to wait. He tells them that he has come to set the earth on fire. The fire Jesus speaks of here is the distress caused by the coming judgment. It is also the fire of the Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles, will describe descending on the disciples on Pentecost.

That fire will strengthen them to go out to the whole world to preach the good news of Jesus' Resurrection. Jesus will be the first to experience the distress of the coming judgment. His baptism will be the conflict into which he will be immersed as he approaches Jerusalem and his death on the cross.

His followers will not be spared that distress. The angels at Jesus' birth proclaimed peace on earth, and Simeon, holding the baby Jesus in the Temple, said to God: "*Master, now you may let your servant go in peace.*" Here Jesus tells the crowd not to think he has come to bring peace; he has come to bring division. Simeon said as much when he turned to Mary and said that the child was destined for the rise and fall of many and to be a sign that will be contradicted. Peace is the ultimate end of the Kingdom of God, but peace has a price.

Jesus is warning the crowd that wherever the Word of God is heard and acted upon, division occurs. Fathers will be divided against sons and mothers against daughters. The coming judgment forces us to look at the implications of our commitments

As Jesus warned in last Sunday's Gospel, a commitment of faith requires us to change our attitude toward material possessions and to take even more seriously our moral responsibilities. This weekend He reminds the crowd that those who commit to Him will find it affects the way they relate to friends and family members.

The angel who announced the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah said John would go before Jesus to turn the hearts of fathers toward their children. But a commitment to Jesus forces us to change the way we live our lives, and this can put strains on relationships. We don't expect to hear such difficult words from Jesus in the Gospel. But it is good to be reminded once in a while that the decision to do the right thing, the good thing, is not always easy and without conflict. Jesus himself did not make easy decisions and avoid conflict.

In today's reading, He reminds His followers to be prepared for difficult decisions and conflict as well.