

Rev. Derek Fairman

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

I would like to continue talking about faith and the Holy Spirit. St. Paul, in the second reading from his second letter to Timothy, mentions fidelity and perseverance. The first reading and the Gospel deal with the theme of cleansing leprosy. Faith is something that cleanses our souls, and I would like to continue speaking about faith and the Holy Spirit using the image of a fire. This fire of love cleanses our souls.

The true test of how “on fire” a person might be is the heat of the fire. Sometimes people are impressed by how high a flame can get, but that is just a function of how high the wood is stacked. Granted, if someone stacks wood in a particular way, the flames can get high, but that does not mean that the fire will last longer. The flames can get very high and then die quickly. This might remind us of what the Lord said about the seed that was sown among rocks: that it grew quickly, but then withered quickly for a lack of roots.

Fires burn according to different temperatures. Take stars for example: red and orange stars can be very big, but burn at a lower temperature. Yellow stars, like the sun, are in the middle. White and blue stars burn hotter. Whenever King Nebuchadnezzar threw the prophet Daniel’s friends into a furnace, it was described as a “white-hot” furnace. Fires with wood stacked high do not get the hottest, and die after the wood is gone. Very hot fires can be used to melt and shape metal. The very hot fires endure for a long time, and can accomplish more.

The measure of the fire is not how high the flames can reach, but the temperature, or the “depth.” In terms of the Unburnt Bush, the bush was strong enough to endure the fire. In terms of an altar or some other base, the stronger or hotter the fire, the purer and stronger the base must be. The metal or solid base must be able to withstand the fire, rather than melt under the heat.

When it comes to understanding people’s souls, the Mother of God gives us an example of how to endure the fire of divine love. In the Tradition, the Unburnt Bush is a foreshadowing of the Virgin Mary, in the sense that her divine maternity did not destroy her perpetual virginity. However, the Incarnation of God’s Word was only the beginning of the New Covenant, the union between God and humanity. The New Covenant reached a culmination at Calvary. At the Cross, Mary stood before her crucified Son. Like the prophet Daniel’s friends, she had to endure the flames of divine love, a love which led her Son to the Cross, to give His life for the salvation of all. She was united to her Son in His Suffering.

Where the flames of divine love burned hottest, where divine love was most intense in the Lord's Sacrifice, she was there and had the ability to endure that love, when most of the Apostles did not. She had a strength that came from God. Her virginity meant she possessed the virtues of purity and strength which allowed her to endure that suffering.

At that moment, was she "on fire" for her Son? Yes, but not in the way that we might think. She was not the most vocal in her grief, or given over to the most emotion. There were tears, but the way that most spiritual writers depict the Mother of God at the Cross is quiet grief and suffering. Rather, they depict St. Mary Magdalen as the one weeping the most, because she was in the habit of being given over to her passions. Yet, few would suggest that St. Mary Magdalen was more grief-stricken at the death of the Lord Jesus than His Mother.

The Mother of God proved the depth of her fidelity to the Lord in her suffering, rather than any kind of vocal or fanatical expression. This is a lesson for us. The flame of someone's faith is not how vocal or fanatical a person can become, but how much suffering a person can endure. The flame of faith is deepened by a true love of God, rather than repressed doubt or fear.

St. John Chrysostom and others have imagined that the Virgin possessed a mystical altar in her heart, that joined with the Lord's Sacrifice upon the Cross. The Virgin offered her own soul, in union with the Lord's Sacrifice. She did not literally offer her life, body, or soul, but she did join mystically with her Son's Sacrifice. She could offer her grief, sorrow, and pain, which fueled her offering.

For us, the Lord purifies our hearts, and strengthens the altars in our hearts, through the fire of suffering. The Lord cleanses our souls as He brought healing and cleansing to the lepers. The Lord brings us opportunities to strengthen our patience. The Lord helps us to grow in kindness, perhaps by teaching us the consequences of unkindness. This fire of love will strengthen us, and by doing so, will ensure that the fire of the Holy Spirit will burn hotter, and we will remain faithful to the Lord, as His Mother did.

As we approach the altar, we remember that this month of October is the month of the Rosary, and we remember the Sorrowful Mysteries, and the intensity of Mary's sufferings. We ask her intercession to enter the mystery of divine love without fear of being burnt. We pray that the Lord will purify our hearts, so that our love and fidelity will be deep and will persevere. We show how "on fire" we are for the Lord by the endurance and depth of the flame of our faith.