

### ***Christ the Divider***

In the name of him who came to bring not peace but division on earth, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel reading contains what are for many the most unsettling words that our Lord Jesus ever spoke. And we can easily see why this is. All this talk of fire and division and setting the members of families against each other just doesn't seem to fit with the Jesus we're used to. No, we're accustomed to thinking of Jesus as a rather mild sort of character. He's gentle. He's the friend of sinners, the *bringer* of peace and harmony—the one who reconciles God with mankind and *unifies* people. The Jesus we're hearing from today is a guy we don't know so well.

And that's probably one of the biggest problems in the Christian Church today: *we don't know* this guy very well. It's a side of Jesus with which we are not familiar. Or if we are aware of it, we deliberately downplay and forget about it. The result is that we end up with a Jesus who only partially reflects the whole person. He becomes what we might call the Jesus of popular imagination instead of the genuine article. And that's okay, we think, because this is a much safer guy to deal with. He's been declawed. His sting has been removed. He's been tamed; I daresay *feminized*. And we like him that way because then he's a Jesus we can be comfortable with, one who doesn't challenge us at all – not at all like the forceful, confrontational, and otherwise divisive Jesus whom we heard from a bit earlier.

But like I said, then he's not the real, complete Jesus Christ. And a Christ who is not complete gives us a form of Christianity that reflects the image of its incomplete Lord. It's lacking something – something crucial. And that in turn gives us a Christian Church with the same lopsided flavor: all soft and cuddly, but no hard steel; plenty of comfortable warmth, but no searing fire. Or, to say it another way, all embracing and tolerating and compromising; but no firm stand on the truth. Friends, things ought not to be this way in the Church of the *real* Jesus Christ who is the only way and the only truth that leads to eternal life.

With this in mind, then, and in light of today's Gospel I'd like to spend some time considering this often-neglected side of our Lord Jesus: that he is according to his own self description the *Divider* of humankind. In particular, I'd like to reflect upon what it means for those of us who bear his holy name. But before we get to what it means for us and to help us understand, it's necessary that we first discover what it meant for Jesus.

You see, in order for him to be Christ the Divider, first he had to be the Christ who was divided. We heard him say so early in the discourse when he said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished." He was referring to his upcoming passion and death. And it may strike us as strange that he calls it a *baptism*, which we normally think of as a simple washing in water; but properly understood a baptism is exactly what Jesus is about to endure: a cleansing – a purification, not in cool, refreshing water; but rather an immersion in the Lake of Fire where the wicked suffer God's unrelenting wrath against sin. *That's* what Jesus experienced on the cross. He who knew no sin became for us *the sinner*. And there he was divided from everyone. On one side the world hated him without cause. We wanted nothing to do with him because he alone was good and holy – because he was God on earth against whom we are in rebellion. And on the other hand, his Father, with whom he had been united in perfect harmony from eternity past, rejected him because he held

Jesus accountable for all the evil that mankind had ever committed and ever will commit. He poured upon Jesus, his Son, the burning fire of his judgment that justly should have been our eternal destiny. Never has anyone been so utterly forsaken than Jesus was upon the cross.

But what's interesting about what Jesus says, is that as awful as that baptism of fire will be for him, he's *already* distressed. This is important: we normally think of Jesus as being the bearer of our sin *only* when he is on the cross. Here he tells us otherwise – that throughout his earthly ministry as he goes from place to place dealing with all kinds of people, curing their diseases, healing their broken bodies, forgiving their sins – he's taking all that human heartache and misery upon himself. He feels it. Like a soldier in combat for weeks on end, unable to wash his body or clothes, feeling the accumulated grime, sweat, and stink, and the lice crawling in his scalp – for Jesus it's like *that*, but infinitely worse because what he's feeling is the mounting contamination of human sin inside him, separating him by increasing degrees from his holy Father. Small wonder, then, that he's under distress and that he eagerly seeks the baptism of fire by which he will be freed from this curse, cleansed again, and restored to his former glory at his Father's side.

All this he accomplished when he underwent his baptism of fire on the cross for our sakes. And having completed his work – which was proven by his resurrection, for if the wrath of God against our sin had not been fully satisfied by his suffering he could not have risen from the dead – (but having succeeded) his *division* from his heavenly Father ended. And so he is no longer Christ the divided, but now Christ the Divider – the One who separates mankind.

When? Well, ultimately, of course, when he returns in judgment. Then, on the great and awesome Day of the Lord, he will stand upon the earth and divide those who are his from those who are not; those who were faithful, who confessed him as their Savior and placed their trust in him from those who did not. The former he will take to be with him and his Father in glory forever. The latter will be forever divided from him, cast off into outer darkness where peace and joy and hope are never known; only endless torment and separation from the gracious presence of the living God.

That division, however, lies in the future. In today's reading Jesus speaks of a present tense division – one that happens to people in this age. It happens whenever by God's holy Word and the power of his Spirit someone comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ. More than likely, it happened to you when you were baptized because that's when the Spirit of God gave you the gift of faith in Jesus. But regardless of whether you first came to faith in your baptism or before it, this much is certain: in your baptism with water, you were united with Jesus in his baptism with fire. God reckoned you dead and buried with his Son. And then he raised you again with Jesus to live a new life united with Jesus and through him united also with your heavenly Father.

Just as Christ's separation from his Father ended, in your baptism, so did yours. What began then, however, was your division from the world. You see, you were born originally into Satan's kingdom. And he was happy to have you there. When you became a child of God and a member of *his* kingdom, you became the enemy of Satan. That is, in your baptism when the pastor traced the sign of the holy cross upon your forehead and heart, he was effectively placing a target there that marked you as one the devil will be shooting for to regain for his kingdom. You became one who got away, and Satan would like nothing more than to

have back – and he’s willing to do just about anything to do it. He’ll even use the members of your own family.

That’s what Jesus is talking about in the latter part of today’s Gospel when he speaks of households being divided, parents against their children and children against their parents and so on. This was especially apparent in the early days of the Christian church when so many people had to make the jump from Judaism as it was practiced in the first century to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. It literally tore families apart as some by God’s grace came to saving faith in Christ and others clung firmly to the myth of their own earned righteousness by keeping the Law of Moses. It happened wherever the Gospel spread. As the Word of Christ spread among the pagans who worshipped false gods, some came to faith in Jesus and others did not. And it almost always happened that those who placed their faith in Jesus became objects of ridicule, scorn, and very often persecution to those who rejected the message of salvation. The faithful were disowned by their loved ones and friends – considered traitors or worse. These people had to choose between their own families and Christ – between peace in this age (that is to say friendship with the world) and peace with God forever. What Jesus is saying to his followers is that they ought to expect it – that if he can, Satan will use your earthly ties to recapture you, to get you to renounce your faith or stop you from feeding it so that it dies on its own.

And don’t imagine for a moment that this was a problem only for the early church. I think that sometimes those of us who were so fortunate as to be raised in the Christian faith in a nation that allows wide religious freedoms forget what a profoundly controversial figure Jesus is. Until the last few decades most people in this country were at least nominally Christian, so we’ve had it pretty easy up until now. That’s becoming less and less the case; and to a certain extent there is pressure being applied to make us feel foolish or backward for believing in Jesus. But it is nothing compared to what those who convert to Christianity today from Judaism or Islam or from having no religious faith at all are forced to endure. They understand these words of Jesus about households being divided only too well.

But let me take it a step further. While most of us haven’t suffered very much of the kind of conflict that being divided from the completely *non*-believing world causes, I’m almost certain that where the majority of us *have* experienced some discomfort is in the area of divisions within the greater house of Christendom. I’m talking about the differing confessions that people you know hold about Jesus, the various denominations and sects that all profess (at least) the name of Christ and claim to follow his teachings. Most of us have family members and friends in other church bodies. And the reason they’re in those churches is that they confess something different about Jesus and his Gospel than we do. And yes, I know this is a controversial and divisive subject; but then, we are talking about a very controversial and divisive guy: the Lord Jesus. The question is: Do we want to confess the whole truth about him or only a part of it?

This is the question we are forced to face when dealing with family members and friends who tell us that one confession of Christ is just as good as any other – that as long as you believe in Jesus, it really doesn’t matter *what* in particular you believe about him, or that you can reduce all that’s really important about the Christian faith to one or two brief sentences. Such views play right into Satan’s hand because as far as he’s concerned the less you firmly believe about Jesus the better. It makes his goal of shaking your faith that much easier because there’s that much less to shake. And so we are pressured to compromise and

unite with liberal Christians who deny things like creation, the miracles of Jesus, his virgin birth, and his resurrection, and who say that things like homosexuality and abortion are not a sins; and with legalistic Christianity that teaches Jesus did his part to save us, and now it's up to us to do the rest; and with rationalistic Christianity that denies the presence of Jesus in his Word and Sacraments and leaves people in doubt about their salvation; and with so many other forms of Christianity that while they have some of the truth about Jesus – and for that we're grateful – also teach potentially dangerous falsehoods about him.

Should we cave in and compromise for the sake of peace in the family? Or should we take our stand with Christ and his whole truth and allow ourselves to be divided in the present age? The words we heard from Jesus this morning leave us no doubt about which way we should choose. Jesus says that he didn't come to give us peace in this age. He came to offer his life as the ransom for our sin and to give us the truth that leads to life eternal. And wherever that truth is being proclaimed in its fullness and purity, it's going to come under attack and cause division.

And let me suggest that we shouldn't see this necessarily as a bad thing. I hear all this time that Christians should not argue among themselves about doctrine as if that were the ultimate evil. That's nonsense. What's evil is the notion that the whole truth of the Gospel is not worth arguing for. And if our arguments drive us into the Word of God to find the answers, then I say bring the arguments on. Then we will all be drinking more deeply of God's saving truth. Then we will all be increasingly divided from the world and Satan's lies and united with Christ our Lord – who is the *Divider*. He divides the light from the dark, the truth from falsehood, and us from our sins so that we can live forever with him.

May he give us the grace to be open to his work of division from now until he brings it to completion on the Day of the Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***