

**HOMILY BY FR. DON MCLAUGHLIN**

**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time C – August 17/18**

**Our Lady of Mercy Parish, Aurora, IL**

**RACISM**

Last week Fr. Mark commented that as he was preparing his homily, he thought the Gospel reading was a little odd for this time of the year. The readings were talking about the “end times” and being prepared. These kind of readings we usually hear in November when the day light is much shorter and the end of the liturgical year is upon us. Fr. Mark took this opportunity to creatively compare that Gospel reading to a coaches “play book”, and that each member of the team needed to study, know and be ready to execute the playbook for successfully scoring a touchdown. Fr. Mark challenged us to know and enact Jesus’ playbook to be ready for achieving our ultimate goal of reaching heaven.

As I read the Gospel for today, which is the continuation of the Gospel we heard last Sunday, I couldn’t help but think to myself that something is radically wrong with the words Jesus spoke. “I have come to set the earth of fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! Do you think that I have come to establish peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” This is not how we usually think about Jesus.

After all, Jesus was known for the comfort he brought people. And didn't he proclaim: "Peace I leave you; my peace I give you"?

In my priestly ministry, and I am sure for Fr. Mark as well, giving comfort to those in distress is one of the most important things we do. People are in need of comfort when facing illness, loss of a loved one, or some other crisis. Many Christians affirm that religion is one of their greatest comforts in life. But today's gospel however makes it clear that Jesus proclaimed other things as well. Things that were not popular during his time and ours too. We need to remember that Jesus was considered an agitator by political and religious leaders of his day. At times, even his disciples found him too much to bear and walked away from him. In the minds of his executioners, Jesus was not crucified for his comforting words. Christianity was founded on the cross. There are times we need comfort, but there are also times we need fire!

So how does this gospel challenge you and me today? As I reflected upon the recent mass shootings, my heart was drawn to the reality that some of these shootings were racially motivated. The gunman in El Paso stated that he specifically was targeting Mexicans. Last week when I shared with some friends that I felt God put it on my heart to speak about racism, the response was an appalled look and the words "don't do it!" Probably some of you here today would counsel me the same.

I can understand the reticence. In our country today the issue of racism is unfortunately being politicized. I know there are a lot of strong emotions and feelings out there. It is a very controversial topic.

But my friend's reactions convinced me all the more that something needs to be said about racism from a Catholic Christian perspective. In our first reading, no one wanted to hear Jeremiah's words of doom and gloom. As a prophet, Jeremiah brought division. Not because God sought to instigate such, but because people choosing whether to listen to and follow God's word – or not – necessarily divided the community. With a message no one wanted to hear, Jeremiah knew that his fidelity to the Lord could possibly result in death and yet he did not shy away from obeying God's call. That's pretty much how I'm feeling today! I'm just praying my message won't result in my death!!

First, racism is not about a political party. It is about the human heart and how that heart embraces or does not, Jesus' message of love. A racist's heart holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard." Certainly Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party took this stance, as millions of Jews, Catholics, and others deemed inferior were imprisoned by them and put to death.

The genocide that has happened in other parts of the world is racism. And the thinking held by White supremacists is racism.

However, it is important to understand the difference between racism and prejudice. They are not the same. Prejudice refers to a preconceived idea about a particular group. For example, some consider our president to be racist, and therefore anyone who supports him or all Republicans must be a racist. That would be as radically wrong as believing all blondes are dumb! – Remember the days of the dumb blonde jokes? Well, Fr. Mark is living proof that not all blondes are dumb!

Racism involves an unequal distribution of power on the basis of race. The civil rights movement in our country in the 60's and 70's sought to correct the inequities that African Americans experienced. For some, it is still a struggle today.

Jesus addressed the racism of his time. When asked “who is my neighbor” Jesus told the story that we know as the Good Samaritan, raising up the outsider, the inferior one in the belief of the Jewish people as the one who did the will of God by showing mercy. Then he tells his listeners to “go do the same!” – To show mercy. Endlessly Jesus proclaimed God's love and mercy for ALL people – and that salvation was for all people, not just one race or ethnicity.

It's amazing to me that with all the technical advances in 2,000 years of Christian history; putting men on the moon, incredible medical discoveries, marvelous smart phones, yet not much has seemed to be successful in changing the human heart.

In 2018, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops renewed its call to eliminate the sin of racism in our country in a pastoral letter titled "Open Wide Our Hearts." Their message calls us to look into our own hearts. I doubt that any of us here this morning are racists. We at our Lady of Mercy are blessed with a wonderfully ethnically diverse membership. Our logo for our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary was "though many – we are one"!

However, we as Catholic Christians are called to confront racism. If we hear racist remarks or see overt instances of discrimination and say nothing, we affirm with our silence that we're OK with the racism expressed by others – whether that person be a politician, our boss, a co-worker, a classmate or even a family member. Racism continues to retain its energy and influence thanks to silent acquiescence.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus tells his disciples that he has come to establish not peace but division. He describes how his message will divide communities and pit family members against family members. Relationships will suffer, and he himself will suffer death.

As with every previous prophet, those who heard – and still hear – Jesus' message had the choice to heed it, or ignore it. THAT is what divides. And that division continues today.

And despite the fact of hardened hearts, we as Catholic Christians are called to do all we can to affirm Christ's message, making respecting the dignity and equality of every human person as part of our play book. And yes, that will likely cause division. Faithfulness to God's word always has.

Some hold that stricter gun control or background checks would be the solution to these tragic shootings. I believe that paramount to ending the madness is converting human hearts to the message of Jesus – and that can't be legislated. It's up to us to open wide our hearts. To pray for the end of racism and by our witness, change human hearts. The more we do that, the more we make God's kingdom a reality in our midst. God is counting on us!! And so too are all the innocent victims!