

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Ninth Sunday after Trinity
August 18, 2019

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Many of us scan the newspaper and then go back to read the articles that catch our interest. Years ago I remember a story which certainly *did* catch my attention. The headline said “**High Profile Converts Pay a Price for Joining Church.**” None of what was said in the article would surprise any adult convert to Catholicism, whether “high profile” or not. And it matters not whether your conversion was decades ago or more recent. The article talked about alienated relatives and friends, and people who offer the most unflattering hunches as to why you would do such a thing. A Mennonite pastor friend of mine from the Midwest called to hear my story and could only bring himself to observe I had “jumped ship.” It was said in a friendly way, but I suppose he was equating my conversion to being over my head in deep waters! At any rate, I have my stories and so does any convert.

When Christ was born the angels sang: “Peace on earth: good will towards men.” It is a painful realization that after so many centuries of Christian belief there is so small an increase of good will and very little lasting peace. Among themselves Christians often live in so much disagreement and division. When we are surprised and disappointed at this it means we have forgotten the gospel! We have forgotten that forty days after the angels sang their joyous song about good will, an old holy man named Simeon said some perfectly terrible things about the cute little baby boy in his arms! “This Child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed.” And in today’s gospel account the Lord Himself makes this very clear. Not only the result, but the *very purpose* of His mission is not union but *division*.

Let’s consider how this is so. To anyone who comes into contact with Christ, His Presence puts a question demanding an answer. The answer is not a simple litmus test, merely saying “Jesus is Lord.” More is required. The answer must come from the *heart*. And that involves action, conduct, and witness. Eyes and hearts must be set on Christ and His gospel. When that happens, we discover many people, most even, are indifferent about the things for which Jesus died on the Cross. Our Lord didn’t want people to be nice, especially on Sundays, and have religion! He wanted the whole world to live for God and thereby be saved from our worst selves. Those who have become alert to the claims of God begin to live for Him and for others.

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In doing this they take on the whole world. Christ's claim is on *all* issues, *all* people, *all* forms of government, and yes, even our sexual relations and checkbooks! When we realize this, it puts us on a collision course with those around us who insist we keep our religion to ourselves. Our commitment to the demands of God can shatter families and break up friendships. Christian witnesses and martyrs in every age threaten societies and governments.

Christians like to comfort themselves with the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and Good Samaritan. It is well that we do...*provided* we remember Christ also speaks of discord and division. He does that in the gospel passage we just heard. Three words stand out.

Fire. Christ is a **destroyer**. He comes to burn up all that is poor and worthless. In the scriptures this is called *chaff*. We might call it "garbage" or "hypocrisy," all the "good for nothing" stuff in our lives, in our ideas, and in our society. We could revive good old words like *hokum* and *humbug* when we read the newspapers. In the incident where Christ cleansed the Temple we see the fire of God's wrath. There is no way you and I are exempt from the possibility of that wrath being directed towards us.

Baptism. Christ is the **purifier**. Those who follow Jesus die to the old, selfish, nature. After baptism our life consists of decisions made for or against Jesus Christ. We make these decisions every day. Many of them can be painful to us. They can be hurtful to those who cannot, or will not, understand we are indeed a work in progress. If we are not in step with those around us it may be "we march to the beat of a different drummer." (You won't get me quoting Henry David Thoreau very often, but a stopped clock is right twice a day!)

Finally, the *sword*. Christ is the **divider**. A sword's purpose is to cut into pieces. The Lord gave an instruction about separating the sheep from the goats. Christ's claim and teachings offend many. That is not what He wants, of course. But it is the inevitable result of His coming into a sinful and imperfect world. St John's *Prologue* reminds us people actually *preferred* darkness to light. The bottom line is Christ is holy and we are not. Not yet! There's good theology in that bumper

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sticker which announces: “Be patient, God isn’t through with me yet!” But remember all the pain of division in the hearts of those who follow Jesus is but a small share (but a share nevertheless) of the far greater suffering in His perfect Sacred Heart because of those who do not follow Him as Lord and Saviour.