

**August 14, 2022**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Abbey Church**  
**First Mass of Fr. Matthew Hegemann**

**Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53**

We read in several biblical books that God is a “consuming fire,” an always faithful Lord whose love for Israel is insatiable, and who demands their exclusive loyalty. It is an amazing image to describe the divine. Fire is all-devouring, ravenous in its hunger, capable of immense destruction...and yet we cannot take our eyes from it once its allure captures our attention, whether a single candle flame in a dark church or a raging inferno engulfing a forest.

The Lord knows that His all-consuming love would annihilate us if we experienced its full effect. That is why He reveals Himself to Moses in a bush that burns but is not consumed; what Moses sees on Mount Sinai is a preview of the fire God will set within his heart as he leads the Israelites to freedom. In the fullness of time, that same furnace of divine love is concentrated in the sacred heart of Jesus, who wishes that the fire He has come to cast would enrapture souls and capture them willingly by the bands of love. Whoever stands near to Christ stands near to this fire.

As a newly ordained priest, Father Matthew, you have drawn near to the consuming fire of Christ in a unique way. You are perhaps terrified now by the awesome burden of the priesthood; if you're not, you will be when you consecrate the Eucharist for the first time in a few minutes. But you have long been fascinated by the strange beauty of the divine fire, and it has been a particular privilege for me to see the Lord enkindling and refining this love in you over the years.

The Lord has certainly blessed your path. Along with the future Br. Christopher and fellow members of the Rome semester “Crusher Class,” you walked in the footsteps of the apostles, retracing Paul’s journeys in Greece and visiting the tombs of Peter and Paul in Rome. More recently, you followed the footsteps of Jesus himself on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. When you preached at our Mass on Mount Tabor just a month ago, I pondered with gratitude the path you have taken – your childhood in Germany and Beaumont, Texas; your years at the University of Dallas; your graciousness in letting Father Denis and others pester you into joining the monastery.

As for your time in the monastery, gone are the days when you, a wide-eyed novice, committed a great fashion faux pas by wearing white to the wedding of your friends Kevin & Laura. Another distant memory now was your response to Bishop Burns last year in the sacristy, after he ordained you to the diaconate; you mumbled a nervous “Thanks, deacon” ...and the confused bishop responded with a hearty and ambiguous chuckle.

At Mount Tabor, where the full glory of divine light once radiated from the transfigured Jesus before the terrified Peter, James, and John, your homily centered on a quote from St. Irenaeus: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” (*This is proof that I listen to your homilies; I’ll quiz you on this one tomorrow.*) The way God wishes to be glorified in you, the fullness of life that He wishes to bestow on you and to others through you, is your priestly vocation. That will require you to draw near to, be burned by, and then share, the consuming fire of Christ’s love.

It is a privilege and a burden, this priestly life. The prophet and priest Jeremiah resolves at one point not to remember the Lord, or to speak anymore in His name; the wretched man’s sufferings are too great, his ministry clearly doomed to failure. “But then,” the prophet admits, “His word was a fire burning in my heart, shut within my bones. I became weary of holding it in; I could not endure it.” And he persevered in his preaching to the bitter end of exile and a lonely death.

The priestly heart, zealous for souls especially at the outset, longs for communion, desires to unify and to spark a blaze of divine glory in every human heart...but division and apathy are often the only tangible results one sees. Jesus promises this in today’s Gospel reading – “I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already blazing!” But the exclusive love demanded by God produces trials and brings about conflicts, both internal and external. (*Though, as a small consolation, you do not have to worry about the mother-in-law situation – there are perks to the celibate priesthood!*)

Like the long-suffering Jeremiah, a lonely and unheeded voice in a time of peril, you will be tempted to think that carrying the fire of divine love, remaining a faithful humble priest, is an impossible task to sustain, a futile pursuit; your fragile flame will be too easily snuffed out by discouraging winds and your own worldly weakness. But in those moments, I hope that the words and wisdom of Scripture will rekindle in your heart the grace you need to persevere – for your own good, and the good of others.

Your study of biblical Hebrew will help in this regard. You might have translated the name of the Ethiopian eunuch who saves Jeremiah from death: *Ebed-melech*, literally, “the servant of the king.” That will be your identity in the eyes of those who will regard you as the servant of Christ the king, His representative, His image: in the sacraments, in your teaching, in spiritual direction. You have an amazing “cloud of witnesses” to inspire you and intercede for you in your priestly service. One such burning and shining example is Saint Maximilian Kolbe, whose feast day is today. In the darkness of the Auschwitz concentration camp, this Polish priest boldly stepped out of line and calmly volunteered to take the place of a young husband and father who had been assigned to the starvation bunker. The stunned Nazi officer, unaccustomed to selfless displays of love, asked why he would do such a thing; Kolbe said simply, “I am a Catholic priest.” That is what priests do: they give life and light, each in their own unique time and manner. Though there be many shades of darkness, the radiant beam of Christ’s light is always the same.

You, Father Matthew, will face different external obstacles than Jeremiah and Maximilian Kolbe; but the interior enemies of doubt, weariness, and temptation will be like theirs. For that reason, you will need others to help you in your ministry, as Jeremiah did. Ebed-melech, after all, was not the Lord’s prophet; he simply saved the prophet when all seemed lost. While you might occasionally think that your Cistercian confreres are throwing you down a muddy well (*metaphorically only – we are Cistercians, but we don’t actually have a cistern*), we hope you know that we will help you up should you fall. That is what priests, that is what brothers do.

The fire of God’s love does indeed burn wildly, at times recklessly, but it does not consume what is good; it only destroys what is opposed to the will of God, and purifies what is worth saving. That fire will mold you into an icon of Christ our high priest, making you a light for those in darkness and the shadow of death. And then, provided you seek only to give light to others rather than keep it to yourself, you will enkindle and enlighten as you share the flame of charity with those who will be strengthened in faith and hope because of you.

May the good Lord let His face shine and His fire fall upon you, dear Father Matthew, now and all the days of your life.