During these summer weeks, our Gospels have all come from St. Luke. Each week, we have heard our Lord candidly tell us about life, both here and hereafter, as he makes his way from the hills of Galilee to the Holy City, Jerusalem. Yes, Jesus is traveling from north to south, from the place of his youth to the certain place of his death. Luke says it plainly: Our Lord “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Those seven words are chiseled in the stone of this Gospel, turning our attention to see what awaits our Lord in the place that will burn with crucifixion shouts.

Today’s Gospel from Luke records some of the harshest, raw, troubling words ever uttered from our Lord’s mouth. Did you hear between his words a heavy, frustrating, even exhausting weariness? “I came to bring fire to the earth. Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No! I tell you! But rather division!” Can these strident sentences come from the same one who once said, “suffer the little ones to come to me and do not hinder them?” Dare we believe that
the Teacher who taught us to “consider the lilies of the field and the birds of air” now lashes out with words brimming with judgment?

And then, as if from nowhere, he says in no uncertain terms that his mission is not peace, but division. Not peace? But our Lord is the “Prince of Peace” isn’t he? Division? Surely not from the One who will pray that we all be one even as he and the Father are one! What is going on in these emotion-filled utterances from Jesus Christ?

At the very least, our Lord **defines the Gospel as a reality that changes our lives.** Both fire and baptism are refining, purifying, and defining realities. It was John the Baptist who declared that Jesus would baptize those who followed him with the fire of the Holy Spirit. For Jesus, setting his face to go to Jerusalem was placing his feet on the road leading to the fire of confrontation, betrayal, suffering, and death. Where did we of faith ever get the idea that our baptism delivered us into the land of safety and easy peace?
Look over your shoulder with me at the long line extending back to the first century where martyr after martyr surrendered their lives confessing “Jesus is Lord”. Pick up the newspapers today and read of brothers and sisters in faith imprisoned and murdered in places with names like the Sudan, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Peace and security in this life are not promised to followers of Jesus. For many still today, a confession of faith is a death sentence.

The living, life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ changes our lives, so much so that we become change-agents for justice, mercy, and freedom. Our Lord surely looked around at those who hung on his every word, fawning over his first-century celebrity, while blinded to the cost of being his disciple. The warning remains: We who follow Him today would be wise to consider the cost, knowing that our saying “Yes” to Christ may in fact bring hostility, division, and rejection.

See as well how these verses foreshadow the cross. As we follow our Lord, making our way to Jerusalem, the shadow of the cross looms larger and larger. “Jerusalem” becomes shorthand for
abandonment and death. Soon, rough wood will take on the look of execution. Soon, a crowd ambling about through the markets will morph into a mob. Soon, disciples who once pledged their loyalty will leave the Master alone and forsaken. The cross changes everything, and everyone. Now the crucial question, “What are we to do about Jesus?” becomes a brutal division that can separate father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The very shape of the cross suggests this division. Timber cut from a tall tree is soon cut up into a vertical stake divided by a horizontal beam. Remember, too, that three times on this road to Jerusalem, Jesus will speak of his coming death and resurrection. Three times he will tell the disciples he will be betrayed, beaten, and killed. Three times they hear his words but shake their heads from deep in their souls, unwilling or unable to believe what they hear. The cross on which our Lord dies is the eternal symbol of this division between the way we live life and the way God intends life to be lived.
Why? Because following Jesus will divide almost everything we believe is certain… / from the one thing that is eternal. Here is the harsh division that cuts through these lines and exposes our stubborn and willful ways. Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, our Lord tells the parable of the rich fool. Having farmed his land well, a bumper crop on the way, this wealthy man discovers he doesn’t have room enough in his barns for the harvest. So he quickly plans a barn building program to solve his problem. With plans clearly outlined in his mind, he kicks back in his easy chair, already counting his profits. When suddenly, his life comes to an abrupt end with God asking him the disposition of all the wealth he soon planned to have. What he thought was certain was inconsequential to what soon became eternal.

This same certain-eternal conflict lives again as our Lord then tells his disciples to end their life of worry and let go of their obsession with things. “Do not be afraid,” said Jesus, “for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Peace? Division? Fire? Oh yes, dear ones! Ours is the Kingdom, but only to the extent we let go of our
obsession with those things we are convinced are certain – barns, storage sheds, possessions, assets, clothes, food – and entrust our lives to the One who goes before us to a cross, giving his life for that which is eternal.

So how do we translate these troubling lines today? What does it mean to live with this harsh division between what we want and what Jesus calls us to be and become? Try this on for size. With one person tomorrow, surprise them and yourself by responding to a criticism or a slight or a dig by smiling and thanking them for helping you become a better person. If that doesn’t seem to fit tomorrow, when you go home or have a quiet 5 or 10 minutes, ask God to pry open your grip on all manner of things that trouble your soul. It could be a job frustration or a health issue or a broken relationship that wakes you up in the night, and has no immediate resolution. Let it go giving God permission to divide it from your soul. Times are that what we need most is not peace, but a sword; not agreement with all heads nodding, but division. It is just this kind of work the Gospel does best. Why? Because following Jesus
Christ severs us from all that is familiar, all we deem safe, to follow the One who goes before us, the One who is our only true safety in the first place—and certainly our only safety at the last.