

SUNDAY 14 AUG 16 - 08:00/10:00 - JESUS CAUSES DIVISION

Heb 11:29-12:2 - The Faith of Other Israelite Heroes

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus the Cause of Division

(Mt 10.34—39)

⁴⁹ “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

Interpreting the Time

(Mt 16.1—4)

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

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Well! What did you think of our Gospel reading this morning? The bit where Jesus says: I came to bring fire and how I wish it were here already! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on households will be divided, father against son and mother against daughter and so forth and so on?' I don't know about you but I can't remember ever learning about this passage when I was in Sunday School. What are we to make of such a harsh pronouncement, and where please is the good news in it? Now there's a lot of really great stuff in the Gospel accounts, the disciples were very competent at remembering what Jesus said, but perhaps in this case, we might wish their memory had not been quite so good. Some things are best left unsaid, and perhaps this is one of them. So what's going on?

In order to understand these hard words of Jesus we must first realize that we're now at a key turning point in the gospel of Luke when Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem. Up to this point Jesus has spent most of his time in the Galilee region preaching, healing the sick and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. But at the end of Chapter 9 we reach a major shift in the thrust of his ministry as Jesus looks forward to what needed to come next. He knew that he had to take up the cross and bear the sins of the world; therefore, he set his face to go to Jerusalem and he began the journey to meet his date with destiny. Hence the backdrop for today's passage, these shocking and attention grabbing words recorded by both Luke and Mathew, rests on those sombre, final days leading up to Good Friday.

Jesus was fired up because he knew his crucifixion, which he refers to as his baptism, was coming. But he had a job to do before then, namely, to bring the message of God's kingdom to the people and the people to God's love. And in today's Gospel, Jesus is delivering some of that divine tough love. He isn't sugar-coating it. He isn't patting the disciples on the head and saying "there, there, now, it will all be okay in the end." Here we see Jesus letting the disciples have it with both barrels right between the eyes. "Look, he says, we're running out of time here. I'm running out of time, and you still don't quite get what I'm talking about. This new way that I'm preaching is going to set the established order on its head. Folks will end up fighting over it. You cannot fundamentally change the way you see the world and expect that it will all go nicely and smoothly. It's not going to be heaven on earth, it's going to get ugly." So how ugly is it going to get?

Well the first thing Jesus does is to use the metaphor of fire to describe the reason that he came; and the question is, what did he mean by that? Biblical commentators differ on this. Some say that it refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, when tongues of fire rested on the disciples. Others think it refers to the persecution and trouble that would accompany the preaching of the gospel by the disciples. Paul had a lot to say about the persecution of past Israelite heroes in our reading from Hebrews this morning. Still others think it refers to purification or judgment. However if we read what precedes and follows this passage in Luke it seems clear enough that Jesus is in all probability talking about the coming judgment. In one sense this echoes what John the Baptist said at the beginning of Luke when he predicted that the Messiah would baptize **believers** with the Holy Spirit and fire, and then warned "but the 'chaff' he will burn up with unquenchable fire". It's a tough message is it not?

It reminds me of that scripture in 1 Corinthians that says that when we get to heaven we're going to stand before God and all of our stuff that we've done is going to be tested by fire and anything that's woody or stubble is going to be burned away but if it's really precious stones or metal it's going to be revealed. I used to really worry about that when I was younger. I lived my whole life thinking, I don't want to go to heaven. I don't want to go to heaven. I'm going to have this big bag of stuff and God's going to say, "Put the bag down. Get the torch, blow torch. (Noise). There ain't nothing there pal. I'm burning the hair off your legs and off the top of your head and I'm starting early.

The 20th century theologian William Barclay writes this, "In Jewish thought fire is almost always the symbol of judgment." And then he adds, "However much we may wish to eliminate the element of judgment from the message of Jesus it remains stubbornly and unalterably there." The funny thing about fire is that you can't be passive about it. You have to deal with it or it will consume you! Jesus' coming is like a fire. You can ignore it and you will perish or you can get on the right side of it and it will purify your life. But the one thing you cannot do is to be neutral toward it. Jesus draws a line that forces us to take sides. From the very start we are told that the message Christ brings is powerful and calls for change. Christ introduces this topsy-turvy kingdom where rich and poor are equals, where rulers reign with mercy and justice, where the proud and conceited are scattered. This is not a universally welcome message, it's uncomfortable and it certainly doesn't sit well with modern day listeners. This fire that Jesus speaks of requires of us change and that's not easy.

And that's just the start of things! For the very next thing that Jesus says is that he did not come to bring peace on earth, but rather, division. All along, we've thought Jesus united people, not that he divided them. All this time, we thought his purpose was peace. Each Christmas we recall the Old Testament text, "And he shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." How then can Jesus say that he has come to bring division and conflict? This is indeed a troubling saying of Jesus.

Now when Jesus speaks of division within households and nations, we should realise that he is not talking about that as desirable, but in some cases as inevitable. Choosing to love and follow Jesus will create division and conflict. The 'sword of division', as Jesus puts it in the parallel passage in Mathew, is the result of Christ-like love. To love people as Jesus did is to stand for something. To stand for justice is to stand against injustice. To stand for truth is to oppose hypocrisy and falsehood. To be a Christian is to love all that Christ loved and to be an enemy of all that crucified him. To follow him is to make enemies. Jesus' message of love made enemies and for it he was awarded a cross, and now he bids us to take up our cross and follow him. All have worth in the eyes of God, regardless of social status, income, gender, religion etc, and he calls us to love one other as he loves us.

But, you know, it seems to me that people today are fed up with the superficial 'smile, Jesus loves you' sort of Christianity. People now want to know, as they look around at the hurting world, as they see families divided in our society, where that authentic love can be found, where it can be felt and seen. Jesus did not come to validate the status-quo but to challenge it; he came to bring fire and division. And the fire and division that Jesus brings comes in the acts of forgiveness from a hurt mother, it comes in feeding the hungry and helping the homeless, in being a welcoming face to the visitor, in stepping out from our cliques to speak to someone else, sitting with the lonely, crying with those who mourn, rejoicing with those who are happy. Fire comes in challenging the unjust decisions of government to benefit the poor, in challenging those in authority, including church leaders, when they are a bit too comfortable, and responding to the challenge of others from outside these walls. Fire means facing the world full on, not escaping from it or hiding from it.

You see, the hard sayings of Jesus are only hard because they call us to live by our convictions; to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. We cannot just hear what we want to hear. We cannot just love those we want to love. We cannot serve only those we want to serve. We cannot put our faith in a closet and take it out in certain circles or at certain times. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "there is a cost to this discipleship," and it's going to put us on a collision course with the values of the world. So, if what we want to do is live at peace with the world, all we need to do is unapologetically embrace the values of the world; it's easier that way. But if inner peace is at all important, then we ought to take the road less travelled, the road where we listen to the still, small voice of Jesus, and follow it. You must know that it might cost you some friends, it might affect your family, and it might challenge you to step outside your comfort zone but a different sort of peace will be yours together with the promise of eternal life in God's presence.

It's said that when you accept Jesus into your life and become his disciple you can begin to experience that deep joy and inner peace that having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ brings. Although it has to be said that for many Anglicans the joy is so deep and the peace so inner that it's hard for anyone else to notice. I guess that's why Anglicans are sometimes called God's Frozen Chosen. That doesn't apply to us of course and I'm sure it couldn't apply to the 8 o'clock and 6:30 congregations at St Mary's. However, whilst that might be so, whether we go to 8, 10 or 6:30 we Anglicans know for certain that we are going to heaven. And the reason why we can be sure is because it says so in the Bible. For in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 it states that the 'dead in Christ will rise first.'

So, *all joking apart*, as we wrap things up this morning this is what I think that Jesus is saying to you and me today as we live our lives. He doesn't want us to be half hearted about our faith. He wants us to have some fire in our bellies, to take some risks and just go for it. He wants us to take up our cross and not falter whatever the costs. In the words of our Gospel text today we hear Jesus' great call to radical discipleship, his call to total commitment, his invitation to revolutionary Christianity. Someone once said, "If following Christ doesn't scare you sometimes, then you're not doing it right." And I'm hoping that as we work through the results of the Growing our Church course and come up with an action plan for the future there'll be ways in which we can all scare ourselves a little as we step out in faith to build the kingdom of God in this place.

Pray with me: Jesus, I want to take advantage of the opportunity you give me to find my part in your plan. But Jesus, I am easily distracted and easily discouraged. Today and everyday, give me the willpower and the strength to overcome anything that comes between me and you in every part of my life. Thank you that your life and death provided the way for me to do that. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen