

Pentecost 10, Year C

Jeremiah 23:23-29, Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2, Luke 12:49-56

Well, that's not at all what we expect from a gospel reading, is it? Where is the Prince of Peace? What about the God who is love?

This is judgement, division, strife. It is about families torn apart. And it is God initiated!

That's not what we expect, now, is it? The days of fire and damnation preaching are past, surely? Our God is benevolent, a God-Father who welcomes all and rejects no one, isn't he?

Well maybe. It's fashionable to say so. And it is certainly true that God does welcome all and desires to reject no one. But a benevolent godfather who turns a blind eye? Well, not so sure. That is to ignore words like those we heard in Jeremiah (23:29): *"Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"* Hardly benevolent.

And Jesus reiterates it. *"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"*

So, is this the real reason Jesus came, to bring the fire of division and strife? Surely it was to teach a right way of living, to usher in the kingdom of heaven on earth and to die to reconcile us to God? So why is it the desire of the one whom Isaiah called the Prince of Peace to bring strife and family division? Why the desire to see fire on earth?

Well, I think we misinterpret this passage if we do actually see it as stating the purpose for which Jesus came rather than its side effects. Jesus says, *"I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!"* Because Jesus feels the pressure, the compulsion to go through with this death by crucifixion. His words tell us that he is suffering in anticipation of the pain and distress that will be involved. Because it is his death to which Jesus is referring by the use of the word 'baptism'.

Baptism means submersion just like a ship sunk at sea. Or we can talk about being totally immersed in a book, baptised. This is what Jesus is facing, being totally submerged in the horror of his death. And he wants it to be over, completed.

But as Jesus looks ahead to the time of completion, he is conscious, at this moment, not of the blessing that will come through reconciliation with God, but the distress that his own distress will bring to others. Because families will be divided and fighting one another, just like fire on earth.

And we know it is so. We have all heard of families that reject a member because that person has become a Christian. And our reading in Hebrews tells, not only of great triumphs of faith, but also of jeers, destitution, flogging, imprisonment and even murder, just because people were embracing Christian faith.

You know, reading that in Hebrews brought to my mind the phrase “red in tooth and claw” and, going off at a tangent, I wondered, where does that come from?

You may know, but I didn’t. It’s from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s very long poem In Memoriam and the stanza including this phrase is very relevant, I think, to our gospel reading:

(Man) Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law --
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed –

The world can indeed rave and shriek against those who believe in Jesus. More often it treats Christians with disdain and thinly veiled sneers. You know it, I know it. And isn’t it the reason why we are so reluctant to tell others about Jesus? The disdain, the sneers, the rejection.

So, what to do? Say nothing at all and avoid the risk of igniting a fire in which we may get burnt, sneered at or worse? Well, maybe not...

Or go all out for it, tell it as it is. Tell what Jesus means to us. Tell of his love and grace. Speak of sin, of judgement, repentance, and forgiveness through the cross of Christ. After all, that is what Jesus did. Risk igniting that fire in which we may well get burnt, sneered at or worse. But doing it anyway because we care, because *Jesus gave himself as a ransom for all people*, as Paul writes to Timothy, *and wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.* (1 Timothy 2:4,6)

Or maybe consider a third way, which I suspect most of us take, if we do anything at all, a middle way that ignores the harsh realities of God’s demand for righteousness and Jesus’s call for repentance. Instead confines itself to speaking of what Jesus means to us and of the love of God.

Skirt over the fact that Jesus died voluntarily on the cross to be the means by which we can be forgiven and accepted by God. Avoid speaking of sin. Speak without mentioning that welcome into God’s family is dependent on

repentance. Avoid mentioning that God is *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9).

So, we speak of Jesus but avoid igniting the fire by mentioning the cross.

Why? Well, of course we don't want to upset anyone, and we don't want to be rejected. And maybe – just maybe – we don't believe that God has a stricter view of sin than we do ourselves. That his kindness is not meant to *lead us to repentance* (Romans 2:4); it is just simply kindness. That maybe Jesus's death on the cross wasn't a *ransom* at all but merely an unfortunate miscarriage of justice because he upset the authorities. That atonement for sin is unnecessary, at least for ordinary people.

But as we go down that route we run a different risk, the risk of falling foul of God's words in Jeremiah, of prophesying a dream and a delusion, of offering straw rather than the sustenance of grain. What God is looking for is for those who have his Word to speak it faithfully.

Now, I don't want you to get me wrong here. I am not advocating that we all go and stand at the clock tower and start spouting on about the cross or knock on our neighbour's door when we get home and do it. Far from it, in fact.

Brian was always the evangelist and looking for opportunities to speak about his faith. But when he started a new job in Surrey back in the 70s, he found that Harry had effectively pulled the rug out from under his feet even before Brian's first day.

Because Harry had become a Christian. And with his new found conviction he went down the office corridor calling in at each of the offices in turn and telling the occupants – at length I believe – that they were all going to hell if they did not convert. So bad and upsetting was it that management had to call him to stop. And, of course, it left Brian with virtually no opportunity to talk about his faith and Jesus.

No, the time must be right.

What I am saying is that when someone asks us why we go to church, comments on our Christian attitude, asks whether we believe in prayer – or says anything else that gives us an opportunity to speak about our faith - we tell it as it is, faithfully. *“For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the LORD. “Is not my word like fire?”* (Jeremiah 23:28b-29a).

The straw of our minimalist inoffensive version of the gospel is not the real deal, the grain; it is straw. It may have some semblance of grain but it is not actually grain.

So let us not be afraid of offering the grain - or even embracing it ourselves; let us not be afraid of igniting fire with God's word. After all, Jesus wishes it to be kindled!

Amen

Chris Shaw, 14 August 2022