

Hebrews 11.29 -12.2., Luke 12.49-56

"I am come to bring FIRE on earth - and not peace but division!"

Those were not quite the words I hoped to read as I began to ponder some thoughts to share with you today! It would be too easy to say that Jesus must have been feeling unusually frustrated as he spoke them, or that Luke somehow adapted the remembered words to his own purpose. This is Holy Scripture, written for our instruction. So what is going on?

"I am come to bring fire on the earth - and how I wish it were already kindled!" We can't but recoil from that thought, as we think of the forests and farmland, homes and whole communities consumed by forest fires around the world of late. Of course Jesus' fire has to be metaphorical; but even so, how can fire on the earth further God's kingdom?

Earlier in his gospel, Luke has John the Baptist promise that the one coming after him will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire - and in Acts chapter two, from Luke's pen once again, we find that fire of the Spirit at Pentecost, when tongues of fire anoint the apostles, enabling them to speak whatever tongue their listeners understand. So - a gentle fire of enlightenment perhaps?

I think it's more destructive than that. For Jeremiah, God's **word** is like fire, a hammer that breaks rock in pieces. And John the Baptist, according to Luke 's early account once again, goes on to speak of the harvest-time fire that burns up the chaff - the purifying fire that will remove all that is useless, counter-productive, or opposed to God's will. "The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" is his promise regarding Jesus, that he may gather the good grain into his granary. This brings us nearer to the sense of frustration in Jesus' words. He came to introduce the harvest of God's kingdom, but there is lot of chaff still around the place, a lot of resistance to the purification God desires. How he wishes he could call his task complete! How we still wish that were so today!

But there is more: "I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how constrained I am until it is accomplished." What baptism is that? His baptism by John is well past, so the future rite of passage can only be his death on the cross - and we remember that as Christians we are told that we are baptised into the death of Christ. John's baptism in the River Jordan harked back to the Israelites' entry into the Promised Land after their 40 years in the wilderness. He offered those he baptised a fresh start that echoed that long-ago deliverance; they left their sins behind them just as their ancestors had left their slavery in Egypt. The baptism Jesus was now to be baptised with, his death and resurrection, would bring deliverance to a higher level again, bringing new hope and assurance of eternal life to his disciples. But the suffering it entailed was horrific. Who would not long to be able to look back on such agony instead of continuing to look forward to it?

So we see Jesus here in what we might call "a bad place". He has come to announce God's kingdom as "at hand", but there is little sign of its arrival. Perhaps he was expecting that his death would bring it in?

According to Luke's account here, it was not going to be that simple. In the experience of the early Christians, the new faith was indeed divisive. Could you be a follower of Jesus and remain an observant Jew? Could you have no knowledge or experience of Judaism and become a true Christian? Opinion was strongly divided, as we learn both in the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St Paul. And as today's gospel suggests, the division was not only in opinion; it split families and challenged friendships.

Observant religious people seldom welcome new ideas and they often hate to see their children worshipping in what they consider an alien faith community, especially if it seems revolutionary; and in the mixed Jewish and Greek-speaking communities of the Eastern Mediterranean of those days, Christian believers, acclaiming Jesus as Lord, faced rejection from both sides. After all, Caesar was the one titled "Lord" and it was an offence to refuse him that respect; in fact the early Christians were commonly martyred for refusing to burn incense to him. How could any loving parent not want keep their children from such a fate?

Yes, fathers were set against their sons, mothers against daughters, mothers in law against daughters in law, and vice versa.

Two thousand years later, things have not improved that much. If we are church-goers, we likely still want to have our children and maybe their children worship with us in our parish church, or at least in a similar one. On the other hand we might join the rising generation in a certain dissatisfaction with the worshipping community we were brought up in; we may seek something new to inspire us, deeper spiritual experience, and inspiration we were not offered before, to bring new meaning to our lives. That is what following Jesus gave the first Christians - whether they saw it as a new dimension of Judaism, stripped of its ritual accretions and legalistic detail, or as an overdue replacement for the tired gods of ancient Greece and Rome.

In both cases, the new converts to the Gospel gladly braved all dangers in Jesus' name - state persecution as well as family disruption. Had not the one true God raised his son Jesus from the dead? Would he not do the same for those who followed in Jesus' Way? For many, martyrdom was not so much a danger as an honour - and a promise of eternal joy to come. And martyrdom, as well as intra-family conflict, continues around the world today. It was reported recently that 1 in 7 Christians worldwide are persecuted for their faith, with nearly six thousand being killed each year. So the divisions are between communities as well as within families. Yes indeed; things have not changed much; the conflicts may even have got worse.

But there was something more than just the pain of such acrimonious divisions in Luke's biblical context. According to Jewish tradition, family disruption signalled the approach of the "end times". We find this especially in the prophet Micah, where the very same phrases "sons against fathers" down to "daughters-in-law against mothers-in-law" are to be found; but it's reflected also in Isaiah and other prophets. I think this explains Jesus' somewhat exasperated reproach to the multitude that follows. "You can forecast the weather easily enough. Why can't you manage to forecast what really matters? To interpret the present time?" The drama of the expected Apocalypse is not far beneath the surface here, a prospect familiar both to Jews and Jewish Christians in the first century. After a period of intense suffering, God was going to break into the world as they knew it with a New Creation in which the faithful would be rewarded and the others get their just deserts.

Such thinking may seem over simplistic to us now, but as we look at the world around us, many of us are indeed reading the signs of the times and contemplating the end of life on earth as we know it. In fact we might feel just as frustrated as Jesus in today's Gospel. The purifying fire he brought, and his death on the cross, both of them in their way disclosing God's love, gave rise to the Christian faith as we have inherited it. But pride and violence, selfishness and greed still persist, and it is they, even more than disagreement about our beliefs, that have brought us to the threatened, quarrelsome, violent, divided world in which we live today. Divine frustration is certainly in order - now even more than then.

It's a long time since Noah's flood - the ancient story of God's frustration with humanity, when he decided to eliminate all living things save for one pair of each from which to start creation afresh. In some species, we're getting down to something close to one pair of each again, cherished only in our zoos; but this time it's human irresponsibility that is the cause, not the divine wrath which God promised would never result in such destruction again. In a world where hope for the future is increasingly hard to find, we can identify all too easily with the frustration expressed by Jesus.

But frustration was not his final word. Rather it was a word of hope: "Trust in God; trust also in me. I am going to prepare a place for you, that where I am you may be also." And in the meantime, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in Judaea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth".

Amen. So be it.