

Sermon for 14th August 2022, Proper 15, 9th after Trinity

Preached at St Michael Smarden and All Saints Biddenden

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

Sermon

This is not a particularly happy gospel reading for most preachers. How do we explain why our Lord, who has for some time been preaching a message of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, suddenly declares that he has come to bring fire and division to the earth, which will set people against each other, even within families? Having frequently offered Jesus' message of repentance and reconciliation as a healing balm for fractured communities and shattered lives, how do we make sense of a teaching that claims it will result in alienation and division?

I think the first thing to say is that these sayings are almost certainly descriptive rather than prescriptive. Jesus is not saying that it's his goal to bring division, but that this is the inevitable outcome when some people accept his message of reconciliation, peace and social justice, and others do not.

Consider his parable of the Prodigal Son. On the face of it, it's a story about the reconciliation between a father and his wayward son. The son realises he has made a big mistake, the father offers him unconditional forgiveness and harmony is restored... except that it isn't. The elder brother, the one who did right, is outraged at both father and son and a new rift in the family appears. Reconciliation and peace between father and younger son led to new division between father and elder son. The father didn't see that coming. It wasn't his intent, yet it was the inevitable consequence of his forgiving someone that someone else thought should be punished.

Much of humanity cannot stand to see someone else getting away with something for which we feel they should be punished. We do not like it when those we deem undeserving receive abundant grace and forgiveness. Those who worked hard to follow the unyielding social and moral rules are outraged when others disregard them and suffer no consequence.

In this sense, everything that Jesus is doing is likely to cause division somewhere. He forgives and heals the unforgiveable and the broken, and the Pharisees complain that he has no right, and especially not on the Sabbath. He throws the moneychangers out of the temple and the chief priests plot to have him arrested and killed. He declares that he has no intention of being king of the Jews in worldly terms, but only in the Kingdom of Heaven, and Judas is so let down he betrays Jesus for a bag of silver.

There is nothing that anyone can do or say in the world with the best of intentions that won't result in someone else feeling it's an accusation against them.

Consider for example the young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg who sailed across the Atlantic on a yacht to a climate conference at the United Nations when she was just 16. She accepted that one person not flying hardly made any difference but argued that her aim was to inspire others and to demonstrate alternatives to air travel. Her message was, and is, one of peace to the planet, peace to the climate, showing that we can and must sacrifice our comforts for the greater good, but – oh! – the divisions that caused! A millionaire casually expressed his hope that her yacht might sink on the journey. A talk radio host told Greta with glee that she had just booked flights for her family for summer sun with zero guilt, so there. The implication of Greta's actions – especially as a 16 year old – was to hold all adults as guilty of inaction in caring about future generations beyond perhaps their own family. Her message of reconciliation with the planet, her willingness to endure hardship on behalf of

her message, continues to trigger an outpouring of vitriol from those who refuse to be told how to live, and by a child at that.

We heard in our earlier reading from Hebrews the sort of troubles and persecutions the early church could expect and did experience simply by refusing any longer to live according to the comfortable established hierarchies of the Roman empire. Torture, mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment; stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword, made destitute, persecuted, tormented. This is what happens if your way of life criticises the powers that be.

Both our readings – especially these harsh sayings of Jesus – remind us that he did not come to validate the social realities and values we have constructed. Such values have a tendency to seek a harmony that favours the establishment and those who hold positions of power, at the expense of the powerless, marginal and expendable. The Church of England does not escape unscathed. We are an established church, with bishops in the House of Lords. We like to see ourselves as pillars of every community, the bedrock of society, the framework determining what is good and what is bad for everyone else.

And it's easy to drift into comfortable conformity as we get older. When I was thirty I wanted to be an eco-warrior and live in the woods with Swampy and the rest. I was inspired by vegan friends to give up meat for years. I stopped driving a car and took the bus and train everywhere. When I turned 40, I tried being a nun, leaving the world of ambition and wealth entirely. But it was all too hard. I like a comfortable home and a nice, modern car, and the latest laptop, all made using energy and resources that are weakening and poisoning the planet. I even like the status and authority of being a parish priest.

In this gospel passage, Jesus reminds us all not to get comfortable in our religious and political clubs. Is our church a pleasant place to be only for people like us? Do we want to keep everything the same because it's what makes *us* content, nostalgic and comfortable? Do we find ourselves making excuses as to why

nothing can ever change, or if it does change, why it can certainly not be improved?

Perhaps we are mentally saying to Greta Thunberg: “ah, we all felt like that when we were 16. When you’re older you’ll understand. You can’t expect us to give up our comforts and our wealth, whether great or small. Even the hippies of Woodstock – 50 years ago – settled down eventually. The times they are a-changing, they sang, but they didn’t, in the end”.

This is not the kind of peace that Jesus brings. It’s not the kind of peace that praises the status quo and says all is well, that we should all know our place. It’s not the kind of peace that says, ‘God has put *you* in charge, so we’ll never quibble with anything you do or say’. Instead, Jesus – who was executed aged just 33 by the way – continually brings division and conflict to the comfortable ways that things have always been done for the benefit of comfortable people.

You hypocrites! Jesus says, at the end of his diatribe. You know exactly what is going on, and yet do nothing. You know exactly the consequences of your way of life and political choices on the weak, the powerless, the poor and oppressed, and you do nothing. You say fine words but hoard your wealth and power, at the expense of those on the margins, at the expense of the whole world, and you do nothing.

This is why Jesus says he has come to bring division. Afflicting the comfortable is the inevitable consequence of his mission to comfort the afflicted.

Don’t worry, I mostly preach to myself. Mostly. But those who do have ears to hear, let them hear. Thanks be to God.