



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Ninth Sunday After Trinity

readings: [Jeremiah 23.23-29](#), [Hebrews 11.29-12.2](#), [Luke 12.49-56](#)

14 August 2022

If we were to search through all the scriptures for the most difficult passages, our gospel text today from Luke would undoubtedly be on the list.

"I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled . . . Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Hard words! They go against the image that most of us hold of a gentle, kind Jesus, the consequences of which are epitomised in the fruit of the Spirit described in Paul's letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But here Luke gives us a picture of Jesus who says,

"I came to bring fire to the earth! Not peace - but division even within families."

The words of this text are jarring and disturbing.

Maybe that's the point. Perhaps we've created an image of God whom we think we can manipulate. A nice, manageable, loving God who will always say 'never mind' when we go astray - sometimes mildly admonishing us, but always gentle, nice and easy-going.

As a former university chaplain and spiritual director of mine once said, tongue in cheek:

Christians are supposed to be nice. Vicars are supposed to be especially nice.

In this text Jesus burns right through our domesticated images of God, challenges us to read the signs of the times and decide where our loyalties lie. This isn't a safe, nice, controllable God but one who burns like fire and cuts like a sword. The God that Jesus reveals is hot, intense, passionate, demanding. And let's not forget the context. Jesus' words carry a prophetic edge. In AD70 - within a generation - Jerusalem would be ransacked, its temple destroyed, as the Romans crushed violent rebellion. Maybe Luke is writing his gospel after this event and reading back with hindsight. Even in Jesus's time, the signs of the times were there. A country with an occupying power, different groups of religious leaders who couldn't agree, freedom fighters or terrorists depending on your point of view, rich people looking to protect their wealth, and many ordinary people caught up in poverty. Just like us today really! Russian aggression in Ukraine, Anglican Bishops at the Lambeth Conference with fundamental disagreements. Climate Change deniers. The Cost of Living crisis. Fat cat oil producing companies making obscene profits while ordinary mortals cannot afford to pay their fuel bills.

Read the signs of the times, says Jesus. People could predict when it would rain or when there would be scorching heat. Why could they not predict other signs of the times which were staring them in the face? People needed to decide where their loyalties lay.

In fact, throughout scripture the image of fire is a reliable sign of the presence of God. God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush; a pillar of fire guides the people of Israel through the wilderness after their escape

from Egypt; when Moses goes up to Mount Sinai to get the ten commandments from God, it looks to those down below as if the mountain itself is being devoured by fire.

Fire - dangerous, unpredictable, powerful - Jesus said that he came to bring fire to the earth. Fire, the sign that in him and through him, nothing less than Almighty God is present.

What does it mean to be confronted with the God who brings fire?

In the presence of fire, in the burning bush, in the pillar of fire by night, in the giving of the 10 commandments at Mt Sinai - what was hidden stands revealed. The truth is made plain. Every nook and cranny of our being is seen into and known for what it is. All our masks and pretensions are melted away and we stand exposed, known for who we really are.

"From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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 (Luke 12:52-53)."

These are deeply unsettling words. The family is our most cherished human institution. We hope for unity in the family if nowhere else. Although we know also that the reality is that this is often not the case. But, here, the stark reality is that when people hear the call to discipleship loyalties get rearranged and sometimes, yes, even families can get divided. We are confronted with the God who sees us for who we are and demands that we make a decision about who we will be. Sometimes people are called to make hard choices about whom and what they will serve. Sometimes we need to stand firm against others even within our family circle or within our peer group who may have a very different world view from our own. But it's not just about family divisions of course. We are a divided society in so many different ways. Making peace' and 'Keeping the peace' are not necessarily the same thing. Jesus was about the former, not the latter.

But acknowledging the presence of fire is not always destructive. The refiners fire is "God's own fire, the fire of God's presence, the fire that wants to speak to us, guide us, instruct us. It is the fire of a potter who wants to make useful vessels out of damp clay. It is the fire of a jeweller who wants to refine pure gold from rough ore. It may also be the fire of transformation, a fire that lights us up and changes us, melting us down and reforming us more nearly to the image of God. It is the fire with which Jesus himself was baptised in the crucifixion and resurrection. The presence of the Holy Spirit who came on the apostles with tongues of fire at Pentecost. John the Baptist said,

'I baptise you with water for repentance, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

The fire with which we are baptised, inviting us into bright, hot relationship with God.

When we're faced with fire, we can't ignore it, or drag our feet, or pretend that it doesn't exist, or put off the decision until we're ready. When the fire alarm goes, you get out. We must decide then and there how we will respond. It confronts us with a decision. It gives us a sense of urgency - we must decide whether we give our allegiance to Jesus Christ or whether we will reject him and go another way.

The God who comes in fire desires not only to separate and refine but also unite. In metallurgy, fire is essential in producing alloys. Through fire, two distinct materials can be combined so that the one might enhance the other to form a new stronger substance. At Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit was described as tongues of fire which rested upon each person, filling them with power. The immediate result was that a group of strangers from every corner of the civilised world united around the confession of Christ as Lord. They went on to overcome one divisive human barrier after another - language, race, culture - to create a fellowship of believers in Christ. It is a story of the spiritual fire that binds.

Through the fire of the Holy Spirit, God works to unite us to himself and to each other. It unites as a community of faith and gives us a peace, which cannot be shaken, no matter what circumstances we face; a peace which comes from the absolute assurance that we are not alone - the very real presence and power of Almighty God, the One who comes with fire, is with us.

Jesus came to bring fire to the earth. Whether we receive these words as threat or promise depends upon how we respond. Discipleship is not all about a gentle Jesus. It is about making choices.

The letter to the Hebrews, in our New Testament reading, talks of

‘running the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’.

Running the race that is set before us is costly. Christians can't just hide their heads in the sand when we see all around us violence, corruption, persecution and injustice, in family, church, community and country. With God's help, we need to read the signs of the times, so that we can speak of God's justice and mercy, and not avoid the real issues in the name of keeping the peace.

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