

Luke 12:49 - Fire

Jesus brings fire and division

Introduction

When I first sat down to look at this morning's gospel for preaching I must confess, my heart sank.

Oh no, I thought, it's going to be tough day at the office.

When I mentioned the passage to another clergy friend he wished me well! Not a good sign!

At that point, I started to think of other passages to preach on.

The Psalm? Or Hebrews?

Or maybe it's time to dig out a little gem from the past?

And then I hear that confounded small voice... 'Neil, don't avoid it, don't opt out, give it a go.

And then I remember Paul in Acts, affirming his commitment to preach *the whole counsel* of God, and of course, I'm caught!

I guess I'm not alone with this, we often gloss over tricky bits.

Rather than lingering to wrestle their meaning and feel their sting, we race on to the 'good' bits, to those bits that are familiar and comfortable and safe.

I don't disparage these bits, they're important, then again, they're not the *whole* counsel of God.

If we only ever do this, then we're like the child who never eats their vegies, who always leaves them on the side of the plate, eventually, we get sick.

To grow in faith, just as in physical health, we need a complete diet, we need the *whole* counsel of God.

We need to *wrestle* with the tricky bits as well as *rest* in the comfy and consoling bits.

So, let's have a go.

Let's *stay* with the text, and let's *hear* what it has to say.

Text and Context

If you look over the chapter you'll see that this text comes at the end a section dealing with faithfulness.

Through *parables* mainly, Jesus has been urging his disciples to be on guard, ever watchful, ever consistent in God's service.

He reminds them that one day, their master will return, it'll be quick and unexpected, and when it happens, they will be called to account.

At this point, there's a change in style, the language becomes extreme, one of my friends calls it 'neon light' language. It's the language of Daniel and Revelation, it's cataclysmic, apocalyptic, it's vivid and strong and arresting.

V49, '*I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled...*'
V51, '*Do you think that I have come to bring peace...? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three...*'

Fire...baptism...division... what's going on here, it's a bit disturbing, isn't it, what's he saying?

Fire

Well, let's take the first metaphor, let's think about fire.

In the bible, fire is a rich metaphor with a many meanings.

There's the fire of judgement, for example, the purifying fire.
Is this what Jesus brings?
Well, in a sense, yes.

1. Judgment.

To be sure, he comes to bring *salvation*, and yet, to proclaim salvation is also to pronounce judgment, condemnation.

When Jesus comes he condemns death, and *all* its dismal allies – illness, isolation, injustice, oppression...

Lynlea said last week,
you cannot have a moral universe *without* judgment. It's true!
Jesus came to kindle fire of judgment.
John (9:39): '*for judgment I have come into the world*'
It's not the *whole* story,
but it *is* a part,
besides, would we really have it any other way?
Look around! Turn on the news! Read a paper!!!
There's a lot in this world that *needs* judging!

Think of Sudan, the things happening this very day!
The killing, the destruction, the devastation...

What kind of God refuses to condemn such atrocity???

No! Judgment is essential.
Judgment is the key to salvation.
In one sense they are two sides of the same coin.

It was only when I judged my own life as bankrupt *without* God,
only as I felt true disgust for sin and selfishness
that I was ready indeed desperate to receive forgiveness.

Judgment. *'I came to bring fire to the earth.'*

It's a harsh word, and yet it's good,
for judgment brings salvation.

'Rise up, O God, judge the earth...' (Ps 82:8)

No wonder the Psalmist is keen, it's a cry for justice, for salvation...

2. Persecution

Now, it's true, a holy presence will inevitably divide,
it's part of judgment.

When confronted, *truly* confronted, with the person and message of Jesus, no one remains indifferent.

We see it in the gospels, he is like a giant wedge,
people are either *for* him, or *against* him, there's no middle ground,
and so it is, still.

Now, as in first century Palestine, a commitment to the rule and reign of this radical Jew will cause a stir.

In this sense he *does* divide, even families.

It's not *why* he came, he came to reconcile, and yet true peace always has its cost.

Jesus is a peace *maker*, he will never simply keep the *status quo*.

His peace is peace with justice, peace with honesty and humility,

it demands our whole life, and this will never sit well with those who have other plans.

Some of you have felt this first hand.

It is hard, and very painful.

When a person converts to Xnity from another religion

it *can* bring families into conflict.

Sometimes it even happens within *Christian* families:

conflict over a difference of style, or interpretation, or conviction.

One of the saddest stories I've ever heard came (I think) from Selwyn Hughes.... (Read attachment).....

Last week, Lynlea spoke of the inadequacies of prosperity theology -
of the belief that assumes that because I'm a Xn

all will always go well for me.

Now, it's true there *is* this line in scripture that promises blessing -
we can and *should* expect it.

Having said that, if we read the *whole* counsel of God,

then we hear of *another* line,

of a line that warns of opposition and struggle and ordeal.

Ultimately yes, it's heaven,

But for now, sometimes, there is also 'hell.'

I think this is well illustrated in the reading from Hebrews.

As the writer lingers in the 'Faith Hall of Fame' we are told of those who through faith:
conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight... received their dead by resurrection.

It's a litany of impressive success,
but then, without even a pause,
we hear of *another* group,
of a group *just as faithful*, and yet who *didn't* conquer,
who *didn't* win,
who didn't get to speak at prosperity rallies.

These faithful souls were

*'tortured,' 'mocked,' 'flogged,' 'imprisoned,' 'stoned,' 'sawn in two,' 'killed,' forced into poverty,
forced to live in deserts and caves and holes in the ground.*

In v50 Jesus speaks of the baptism that awaits him,
it is a baptism of *fire*.

He will suffer,
and so too, at times, will we.

In our world, at this very moment, there are Xns passing through the fiery ordeal.
I mentioned Sudan, I could have listed 10, 20, 30 other places!
Sisters, brothers, suffering *because* of their faith.

We need to pray,
to do *all* we can to encourage and protect them.

3. Passion

The fire of judgment, the fire of persecution,
finally, the fire of passion.

In The Message, Eugene Peterson translates v 49 like this. 49: *'I've come to start a fire on this earth.'*

For me, this brings out a more positive sense.
Ablaze with the good news of the Kingdom of God, Jesus has come to set *us* on fire.
On fire with a passion for worship,
of fire with a passion for true community,
on fire with a passion for justice and peace and healing!

The verse continues:

*'I've come to change everything,
turn everything rightside up—*

how I long for it to be finished!

Tell me, how's your passion for God?
Do those early fires still blaze, or do they need some stoking?
A fresh infusion of Holy Spirit and fire?

'Don't burn out;' says Paul, to the Romans,
'keep yourselves fuelled and aflame.' (The Message 12:11)

Timothy is told: *'Fame into flame the gift ... which is in you...'* (2 T 1:6)

Friends, Jesus came to set his church on fire!

When his spirit descended upon those first disciples:
'tongues, as of fire ... rested on each of them.' (Acts 2)

A lukewarm church, a Laodicean church, is a sick church,
it makes God sick. (cf Rev 3:14-22)
'Because you are lukewarm I am about to spit you out of my mouth.'

We are the church of *God*, the church *in* God, *en theos*,
Enthusiastic! That is our hallmark – fire, passion!

I love that prayer in the daily office of the prayer book:
Lord, *'as we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence ... set our hearts on fire ...*

It's not rocket science, we've all seen it, a fire burns low
unless it's stoked.
We need stoking,
we need to go on being *filled* with the Spirit,
we need to go on *meeting, worshipping, praying, feeding* on the word, *encouraging* one
another,
it what's Jesus wants,
for he came to set the world alight.

Prayer

Lord, we began being a little afraid of this passage,
Now, hopefully, we're encouraged.
Encouraged to relish the whole counsel of God,
encouraged to heed judgement and seek salvation,
encouraged to stand firm in the fiery ordeal, and to pray for those who suffer,
encouraged to call down holy fire that we might blaze afresh with passion for the purposes of
God.