

Luke 12: 49 – 56

Jesus said to his disciples: ⁴⁹I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵²From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³they will be divided:

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.'

⁵⁴He also said to the crowds, 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Other Readings: **Jeremiah 23: 23 – 29.** **Psalms 82** **Hebrews 11: 29 – 12: 2**

Homily

Today's gospel passage from Luke is not a very cheerful! Remember that Jesus and his disciples were on their final journey to Jerusalem. As Jesus moved closer and closer to his destination – his death – a sense of urgency must have been rising in him. There was so much his disciples still did not understand about the Kingdom he had been born to rule. They were still looking for a Messiah who would be a military champion, someone to bring down Rome in a great show of armed strength. They were looking for a king who would restore the throne of David. They were not looking for a King reigning on the throne of heaven, or a king who would be a servant, or one who would be tortured and executed. Not that kind of king.

It must have been very frustrating for Jesus. He had been teaching with stories and parables about the way the Kingdom of God works, and they still didn't get it. Once in a while, there would be a glimmer of understanding, but it would quickly fade. Can you hear the exasperation in his voice?

Jesus, who only recently was rebuking James and John for wanting to bring down fire on some Samaritans who had not welcomed them, suddenly declares that he cannot wait to bring down fire himself. (Can't you just hear James and John complaining, "How come *you* get to when we don't?") There is a difference between cleansing fire and fire that consumes. James and John were eager to destroy, but Jesus is talking about cleansing, purifying fire. He knows what lies ahead for him, and for his disciples, and he wants to be sure they have been refined and tested, so that they can remain strong when the time comes.

The Jesus we see in this passage seems out of character with the Jesus who loves and heals and cares for the poor. This Jesus announces division instead of peace. His rant sounds more like John the Baptist than the Beatitudes. But Jesus has not come to validate human institutions and the values those institutions promote. Jesus has come to set into motion God's radical will for the world. The stress Jesus is under is not anxiety, but a total absorption in his mission. That mission is to redeem a broken world.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus pits "peace" against "division," treating them as opposites? We often think of the opposite of peace as war, and the opposite of division as unity. But here it's as if Jesus is saying *any* division is war, and there can be no peace without complete unity. He is not satisfied with half measures. But equally, it is not Jesus' *purpose* to set children against their parent or parents against their children: this sort of rupture can be the *result* of the changes brought about by Christ's work.

And then there are all the divisions Jesus lists are between generations? Jesus is not saying that it is his intent to separate family members from one another, but that family ties no longer determine a person's identity, vocation, allegiance, and status. Instead, they will be determined by whether or not that person accepts or denies Jesus as Lord. What ties believers together is not the covenant of ancestry, but the covenant of blood, poured out for those who find fellowship in the family of God.

The harsh sayings and indictments resounding in this text remind us that Jesus has not come to validate the social realities and values we have constructed. Such social realities and values often end up favouring those who hold positions of power at the expense of those who are powerless. The radical purposes of God have completely demolished the status quo. Jesus shatters it with his mission of compassion, mercy, and justice. Staking our claim with Jesus will inevitably separate us from those who deny his Lordship. Coming alongside Jesus in his mission will most certainly divide us from those who fear giving up their positions of power in order to bring peace and justice to others. God's divine plan for peace is not always welcome.

The problem is not so much that we are *unable* to interpret the signs of the times, but more that we are *unwilling* to do so. It's interesting that Jesus uses this word "interpret,". The word 'hypocrite' which Jesus aims in our direction – also refers to an actor, or an interpreter. Just as an actor puts on a character different from his or her own and interprets a role, so a hypocrite interprets the weather but not the more obvious current state of affairs. This kind of interpretation is superficial, not authentic, just like an actor dressed in costume and stage makeup. It is hypocrisy.

Jesus holds division and peace in tension, and asks us to interpret the times through God's clock. What time is it? The same time it was 2000 years ago. Time to wake up.

Jesus' fire creates a new life in us that is better than the old one. It will cause conflict with the world, but it is better to be true to yourself rather than someone else's perception of yourself. We belong first to Jesus and second to the world. Jesus asks for total commitment - a commitment that seems radical to the world. It creates conflict, difficulties and struggles that strengthen us for our walk with Jesus and our mission in the world. God will help us overcome the struggles our new life will cause. The fire of the Holy Spirit burns away the dead branches that litter our lives and inhibit our spiritual growth. It also empowers our joining with Jesus.

If we feel discomfort, then it is a painful sign that the church is alive and well, and that the family is adjusting to God's love and God's peace.

The time is now. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Amen.

Conversation Questions

1. So what does the weather look like here today? What time is it getting to be?
2. What are the current concerns of the Kingdom, which Jesus is so eager to bring to completion?
3. How are we being hypocrites, acting out our own short-sighted interpretation of "the way things are," and missing the point of the way things ought to be?

4. Is there anything else from the passage that speaks to you not already discussed?
What is it?
5. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today? #everydayfaith

Prayer

Spend some time in silence, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

Almighty God,
who sent your Holy Spirit
to be the life and light of your Church:
open our hearts to the riches of your grace,
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit
in love and joy and peace;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Gracious Father,
revive your Church in our day,
and make her holy, strong and faithful,
for your glory's sake
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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