

Sermon Sunday 17th August 2025:

Isaiah 5: 1-7 - 5 Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ²He dug it, cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watch-tower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem, people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down. ⁶I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Hebrews 11:29-12:2 ²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. ³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, so as to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented, ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect. **12** Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Luke 12: 49-56 ⁴⁹'I 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 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?

Collect: 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. **Amen**

Post Communion: Holy Father, who gathered us here around the table of your Son to share this meal with the whole household of God: in that new world where you reveal the fullness of your peace, gather people of every race and language to share in the eternal banquet of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Sermon: As you are aware there is a discernment process going on for the next Bishop of Leeds, and for the next Archbishop of Canterbury, though I don't know so much about the latter process! One of the observations made on quite a number of the replies to the consultation for the Bishop of Leeds, is that people want a Bishop to be gentle and approachable like Jesus. And, of course, gentleness is something that would be welcome in a Bishop.

However, assuming that Jesus was always gentle is a perception not borne out by what we actually know of him from the Bible. He could be gentle, and at Tuesday's service, we heard the reading about his gentleness towards children, as inheritors of the kingdom of God. But readings like today's, in which he warns those following him that he comes to bring fire and even division to families, show that Jesus was not always gentle and indeed could be quite punchy, challenging and even divisive.

Sometimes when Jesus gets cross, it is with the Pharisees, the religious leaders, the traders in the Temple; people who may be exploiting their position or enforcing religion in a way that is harmful. His anger is often justified by commentators as being righteous, because it's OK to be cross with those abusing religion for their own ends or power. But in today's reading Jesus is not speaking to Pharisees, leaders or others he accuses of hypocrisy, but to the crowds of ordinary people who have gathered to greet him; and to his own disciples, the people who have given up everything to follow him.

So, what is he doing? Why is he so cross? Why is he calling down fire and division? It seems to me that Jesus is trying to shock the crowds out of their complacency, to show them that this religion thing isn't all gentleness and healing and kind words. He wants them to realise that it is a matter of life and death, not something that they can just observe but something that will face them with difficult choices in their own lives and their own families.

This is not the Jesus of warm embraces, blessing children, calling the weary to rest and lay down their heavy burdens, but a Jesus who makes us feel uncomfortable. And it is the discomfort that is the point. These words are meant to wake us up.

But as we look at it, it's worth remembering that there is fire and fire. Sometimes a fire is a warm, cosy embrace; a fire in the hearth you can warm your hands over, or a camp fire on which you can toast chestnuts or marshmallows and sing songs around. Yet that is not the fire Jesus brings.

Nor is it the fire of wildfires and devastated forests, cities and towns; the fire of indiscriminate destruction or the fire of warfare and bombs, the sort of fire that has razed Gaza and Dnipro, Donetsk and Mariupol to the ground; the sort of fire that has destroyed homes, livelihoods and even lives in Mogadishu or South Sudan.

The fire that Jesus brings is a refining fire, a fire that purifies, that sorts the wheat from the chaff and sorts out peoples' priorities. It is no more gentle than the indiscriminate, destructive fires but it is more purposeful, it is a fire that refines to bring good out of evil, to bring new life out of the embers and pure metal out of the dross.

There are parts of the world where, historically, indigenous people have used fire as a land management tool. In Australia fires set by the Aborigines are called "cultural burning" and the practice also happens in South Africa. The purpose of such fires is to enhance other wildfire management strategies, creating gaps to reduce the risks of fire spreading.

It also causes the land to be laid fallow before re-sowing and the ash that has fallen to the ground in the embers to be re-absorbed into the earth and recycled, as a form of fertiliser. The fire renews and nourishes the earth in a way that enables new life to flourish, and to come back in strength.

A similarly purposeful fire is the blacksmith's fire, used to bend and shape metal into tools, horse shoes, jewellery or other items of beauty and usefulness. The potter's fire that bakes new earthenware and pottery is also a fire that brings new things out of the flames, new beauty, new life. And it is this sort of fire, the fire that clears away, refines, nourishes, allows for bending and shaping and new life in all sorts of forms, that Jesus is talking about.

And when he talks about divisions, Jesus is not talking about the sorts of pitched and destructive battles, that cause interminable war, that goes on for years, such as religious battles in former years, like the Thirty Years war, the civil war or current wars in various parts of the world.

Instead, Jesus is talking about divisions that arise from the refining fire or the heat of having to make decisions about which way to go. He is talking about the sort of challenges over which people will have to make up their own minds about which path to take rather than blindly following because our family have always done this. In a post-Enlightenment age, with universal education, it is perhaps more difficult to appreciate the challenge that Jesus was throwing down to his audience, where the role of community, family and religion was revered, practiced and taken for granted much more than in our more individualistic age and culture.

Jesus was saying to his audience that divisions would arise as the challenges of his message and his call would require each one to make their own decisions and follow their own conscience and that inevitably, within families, people may choose different sides. Far from being a family friendly religion, as much of society's stereotypes and parts of the church would have it, Christianity is actually a religion that calls us through our individual consciences into a much larger sense of community.

And the challenges that Jesus brings, to serve our neighbour and even our enemies, to trust God instead of wealth, to leave what we have known, even if necessary our families, to follow him and become part of the Christian community, is the sort of challenge to our priorities that can feel like fire.

I have had quite a few conversations with people in different contexts over the course of my ordained ministry – and even when I was a lawyer, about how life changing news alters peoples' priorities. It may be a major medical diagnosis, a legal verdict, a company going bust, the breakdown of a marriage, but these seismic events have changed their goals and what is important in life. Recent examples include a family ditching ideas of a large, grand wedding in a couple of years for a wedding much sooner, in the family home, under an emergency licence. Families faced with disabling and terminal diagnoses who wanted to use their time to make memories and raise funds for charities.

It is those life-changing diagnoses or events that refine, like fire. They are not chosen, they are not gentle, but they cleanse by revealing what is most important in life, and in the light of that revelation life has to change and move to a different path, aligned with the priorities that the life changing events have revealed with such clarity. Because in the wake of such revelations, in the wake of such fiery clarity, you cannot live in the old dispensation any more.

It is an idea beautifully summed up in the closing lines of TS Elliot's Journey of the Magi, "All this was a long time ago, I remember, And I would do it again, but set down This, set down This: were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly, we had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death but had thought they were different; this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, With an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death.

The purpose of the fire is not to scorch and burn and destroy but to make us sparkle with radiance and to share that radiant and fiery love with others, so that they too may face the choices and challenges in their lives that can enable them to be radiant too.