

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. 31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. 35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, 40 since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

12 :1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Luke 12:49-56

49 "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!
50 But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. 52 From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." 54 He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. 55 And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. 56 Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"

Peace or division? Luke 12:49-56

When Jesus appeared to the gathered disciples after his resurrection, his first words were 'Peace be with you'. In John's gospel on his last night with them before his crucifixion, he says this: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

Jesus was undoubtedly a man of peace. So in the light of that this passage today could really be quite confusing. Creating division is a central part of our political life today with the so-called culture wars raging in the media. This week content warnings were placed by some universities on parts of the Bible and Shakespeare, and some classic books have been removed from courses because the content may be disturbing. No more disturbing of course than much of what we all regularly watch on TV or the internet. But *the way* all this is reported *causes division*.

This statement of Jesus is directly relevant to us:

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?

No, I tell you, but division.

As usual he speaks truth into our own situation, but how are we to interpret this statement for ourselves?

It's a comment which could cause confusion because Jesus actually said *both* – that he brings peace *and* that he causes division. It's not an either/or but a both/and.

You can hold two things to be true at the same time!

But go back to the first verse we heard: 49 *"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"*

Fire is often used in the New Testament to describe the Holy Spirit, but also for judgement. Here Jesus is warning about judgement. It's designed to shock. Although he preached love, He also challenged people and he still does. What he's saying, as Tom Wright points out in his commentary, is along the lines of "Prince of Peace, eh? More like Prince of Division!" because reality is that life is not comfortable. The reason He is here is because the world is in a mess and in order to sort it out we must listen to him and act on it. He wishes the fire or judgement is already here because he comes to *bear* the judgement for us, not because he wishes to *inflict it* on us (Morris commentary p240). This is a message which has got badly misunderstood – yes there is judgement, but Jesus came to save and not to condemn. His crucifixion, which he describes as a baptism, will be the moment that it's finally achieved, and so he looks forward to it, although his suffering will be great.

The fact that too often we regard faith as a thing of comfort must be challenged: 52 *From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.* Jesus speaks the truth, but people will more often than not reject the message. Families will be divided. I don't suppose anyone here has an entire family who believe in Jesus.

Mine certainly don't, although some of them have professed faith at some point. Jesus forces us to make that choice. Or maybe we're just indifferent. We may believe him to be irrelevant, and that's our decision. The church, having received and believed his message, has the responsibility – Jesus's prophetic commission no less – to declare the truth of the gospel as He did, without fear that it causes division. That is the reality. Jesus knew that the truth of the human condition is that we are in *desperate* need of faith in a God who can be trusted.

The second part of this reading is a further challenge, this time to the crowd, not just the disciples, to read the signs of the way things are going for themselves.

And so this is a word for us today as well:

54 *"When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. 55 And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. 56 Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"*

It's not for me to be prescriptive here, Jesus wasn't. But we can look around us and see the economic and political situation, the climate situation, the wars and disease, and many other issues, and draw our own conclusions. In fact it's more that we *need* to, rather than just hoping that things will work out. The temptation to apathy and abandoning of responsibility leads to the lack of leadership and direction we see across the world at the moment.

How is it that we cannot see what is in front of our eyes?

Michael Wilcock in his commentary says this:

'The majority of [people] who can see meanings and connections and relationships in most of the phenomena in the world around them, and all the more so as their civilization becomes more sophisticated and rationalistic, are rank hypocrites when they look at Jesus Christ and pretend that they can make nothing of the remarkable facts of his life, death and resurrection.'

Craddock in his commentary (p166) says 'Jesus is the crisis of the world'. The word 'crisis', interestingly, bearing in mind our unhinged media reporting at the moment, *does not mean* emergency, it means **a crucial or decisive point or situation**. So there is a judgement to be made, whether we like it or not. Is Jesus Christ as He claimed, the Way, the Truth and the Life? Is He the way to eternal life or not? And this *doesn't mean* a nice time when we die. The Lord's Prayer talks about His kingdom coming *on earth as in heaven* so our faith is emphatically *not* pie in the sky but very much about *what we do* and *who we are* now, every moment that we live. We enter eternal life the moment we surrender to Him. We are already citizens of the kingdom. (See the front of the Parish News – we have been given the kingdom!) If we acknowledge Jesus as Lord then his life and words hold the answers. If we follow Jesus, that is life as it was meant to be, and it does bring true peace, and not division, because true peace can only come from a living relationship with your creator. Amen.