

## **Sermon: Our Divisive Lord**

One of my personal heroes of the faith is the great reformer, Martin Luther. His stand against the abuses of the medieval church – from nailing the famous 99 theses on the door of the Wittenberg church to his courage at the Diet of Worms, where he was asked to denounce his teachings to the Roman Empire, but summed up his response in the statement “here I stand, I can do no other”. One of the key things about his story, it seems to me, is that it is testament to the truth of the gospel passage today – that Jesus brings discord, not peace.

This is a pretty shocking claim. Isn't Jesus the ‘prince of peace’? Didn't he say, “blessed are the peacemakers”? What are we to make of this apparent contradiction?

Let's start by looking at the text.

“I come to bring fire to the earth,” Jesus says to his disciples, “and how I wish it was already kindled. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!”

There are two strong symbols here. The first is fire. It was a column of fire which guided the Israelites through the wilderness; the tongues of fire resting on the disciples at Pentecost; the refining fire that Paul spoke about. It can mean a lot of different things – destruction, purification, renewal – and all of them bring different nuances to bear.

The other image is of water. To be baptised is literally to be dipped in water. But, more broadly it means to be washed clean, to be purified. Why do we wash food, or our hands? To cleanse them. And if you have ever sterilised a needle with a match flame before extracting a splinter, then you've used fire's cleansing power.

So, working together, we have an image of purification, of being washed clean, of all that is impure, unreliable, not lasting being stripped away.

But what is the baptism with which Jesus was to be baptised?

For us, baptism is a joyful event. But beyond the celebration of new life and new faith, it is going under the waters of death, and being brought to new life.

The baptism with which Jesus was to be baptised was, of course, his suffering, death, and resurrection.

“Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three.”

Jesus sees the division the gospel brings as starting “from now on.” You can certainly see this working out in Jesus’ life – it was the acute division that he brought that led to his execution by the religious and civil authorities. Now that’s serious division.

You can also see it at work in the community to which Luke was writing as people separated from their old communities and old ways of synagogue and temple to commit themselves, body and soul, risky and mysterious new movement.

And finally, Jesus changes his focus to the crowds, and to those who think they can read the signs of the times.

He 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. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

The Mediterranean is, of course, west of Israel, so that’s where the rain came from. And to the south, Egypt and other regions that are hot places.

It's the same for us – only, of course, rain usually comes from the west, and heat comes from the south and southwest.

But what's with the whole “hypocrite” thing? What's hypocritical about being able to give a reasonable weather forecast? What's the problem here?

Jesus uses it to mean someone whose outward appearance doesn't match what they are really like. Often, we use it in English to mean someone who claims to moral virtue, but doesn't live up to it.

However, I think what he's getting at here is that people who pass themselves as knowing what's what, who pride themselves in understanding the ways of the world, but haven't got the foggiest notion of what is really going on. They can see rain brewing in the oncoming clouds, but they don't understand what's really going on, right in front of them.

Though, it's stronger than that. They are hypocrites because they should know what's going on – and they should be onside with it. It's not just that they can't see, it's that they actively won't see, and oppose Jesus and his message.

Which is that the Kingdom of God is being inducted, and Jesus is both its messenger and its inductee.

So much for what the passage says. But what does it mean?

I must admit, when I first saw the passage for this week, I was a bit bewildered. When I'm preaching, I ask myself: what is the good news here? So, when I began to research this passage, I encountered many confusing interpretations of Jesus' words and message.

I eventually discovered that I was far from the only person to worry about this. A lot of people writing on the lectionary this week have chosen to go

with the Hebrews reading, with its encouraging stories of heroes of the faith.

Those who did look at the gospel often seemed to want to downplay the conflict. They could see all the division in the world, and they wanted to give advice about how to not have conflict, or how to handle it well.

I can sympathise with that desire. I am ambivalent about conflict myself. I like a calm; quiet life and I don't want to be bothered with conflict and all the nasty shouting that it can engage. Unfortunately, the state of the world around us doesn't seem to want to let us escape conflict.

And of course it is important to handle conflict well. Just because you are in an argument with someone doesn't mean that you are necessarily following Jesus' example, no matter how strongly you feel about it. Just because you feel you are being persecuted, doesn't mean that you are in the right. Sometimes you are just wrong, or very self-righteous. Jesus was particularly scathing on the topic of self-righteous people, which ought to be a clue for us.

However, interesting and worthy as all that is, I don't think that's what the passage is about. The very short version of the passage could be rendered as: Jesus is doing something which is going to cause division and people who should be on side with it can't seem to even see it.

So, at one level, this is just telling us how it is. The essential breaking in of God's Kingdom upsets the natural order of this fallen world, and that will inevitably cause division.

Being a Christian sometimes, is not a dinner party. It is confessing that, contrary to appearances, Jesus Christ is Lord. We do not belong to ourselves, but rather to God, and to one another.

It is, in short, important. It's easy to overlook this, somehow. When confronted with the problems of the world, it can be hard to see that our message has any traction. The message that, God is acting through Jesus

Christ to bring God's Kingdom is so distant from our instincts that sometimes we are tempted to remain silent.

Surely the solution is to be found in economics or political science or some species of personal enlightenment, rather than this alien, counter-cultural message?

If all that exists is to please ourselves, then there is only a short step to the depth of meaninglessness, because what I want isn't a strong enough thing to hold onto. If all that we have is our own desires, then that is a very small thing against the infinite depths of heaven.

There is a messiah – there is a Lord of all. And in and through this Messiah, God speaks. We can only be truly free when we place God at the centre. The Kingdom of God is within us – we can participate in God's plan for the world, not as self-generating geniuses, but as God's shepherds. To not grasp that is to be like those people who are so good at telling what the weather is going to do but so unable to see what is really going on.

This is something worth holding onto. If we aren't experiencing at least a little division, a little tension even within ourselves over Jesus' claims on our lives, then perhaps we haven't really grasped quite how fundamental the Gospel is.

Which brings me full circle back to Luther. It was no light thing to stand up to the medieval church, but he persevered, as did the witnesses the Hebrews reading today talked about. And as did, of course, Jesus, whose followers we surely are. Amen