

Luke 12: 49-56 Reading the signs of the times

18th August 2019, CCO & StJN

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our God. Amen.

This is quite a hard passage for those of us who want to preach the Good News! It doesn't sound much like good news, does it? Isn't Jesus the Prince of Peace? Don't we look to him to bring peace to our troubled world? What then does he mean when he says he came to set the earth on fire and to bring division, even within families? And what's all this about reading the signs of the times?

Let's look at this in two parts. First Jesus says 'I came to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to receive, and how distressed I am until it is over!' This is clearly a cry of anguish. Jesus can see what is coming for him. He himself can read the signs of the times around him. He knows that the religious authorities are now out to get him, to shut him up and be rid of him. But he knows that he must stay true to his calling. He must not cut and run and abandon those who have heard his words of truth and love and who want to live his way. He must remain faithful, even though it will lead to great suffering: that is the baptism he is referring to, the being plunged into the depths of the waters, submerged in the grim and terrible experience through which he must pass, until he emerges triumphant on the other side. That is what our own baptism symbolises, and that's why baptism by full immersion is rather more powerful as a symbol than the 'sprinkling' with a little water that we usually do!

And why does Jesus say that he has come not to bring peace but division? I think this is telling us that Jesus has come to realise that his message is so radical, so different from what people were expecting, that there will be fierce disagreement among people

about it. How right he was! Already the Jewish authorities have turned against him. Jesus predicts that his disciples will be thrown out of the synagogues, and that is exactly what happened. We know that the early church suffered terrible persecution, and even today the Christian church suffers in many places. It can be hard for us to see why, when we know that the message of Jesus is one of love, of acceptance, of forgiveness, of hope. As that lovely Good Friday hymn, My song is love unknown, puts it: 'Why what has my Lord done? What makes this rage and spite?' What's not to like?

Well, while the gospel message *is* one of love, of forgiveness, of grace and of hope, it is also a radical message of challenge, a call to live a life that is NOT dominated by ME, and what I want. While we rejoice in being loved and forgiven ourselves, of receiving hope and meaning for our lives, we are called to *show* that same love, that same forgiveness, that grace to everyone else. And we struggle with that. It will often mean that we have to make sacrifices for the good of others, that we will have to put ourselves out to help others, and they might not be the least bit grateful!

Having had a week with my little grandsons, I am going to draw on them unashamedly for some illustrations for this sermon. After all, these little people can so often show us what we are really like ourselves, only because we are big and think we're all grown up, we sometimes can't see our own shortcomings. And sometimes, we have become so worldly-wise, so jaded, even so cynical, that our eyes can no longer see the deeper truths that are staring us in the face, and challenging us.

For example, the other morning, at 8am, I asked Rufus to put his jigsaw pieces back in the box instead of having them scattered over the floor: he promptly lay down on the floor and wailed "I'm too tired!" At 8 o'clock in the morning. We can all be good at finding excuses for NOT doing what we know we should do!

And sometimes, it takes these little ones to *show* us what we *should* be doing: as we were driving home from a day out, Teddy's little voice suddenly piped up from the back seat: "Why are some people in the world really poor and we're not?" What a good question, and from the lips of a 5 yr old! That's the sort of question that proves to me that there is something of God in each one of us, something just waiting to be allowed out and expressed in our world. Teddy already has that sense of fairness, of justice, which we are all called to model. Mind you, this is the same little lad who, on the same car journey, might have a fight with his little brother over a toy that he doesn't want to share!

Doesn't that sum up all of us? Our hearts can be in the right place; we have good thoughts, we can see what is right, what is just, what is true – especially when it is 'out there', something general, an idea. But when it comes down to us, to our own personal sphere, when it makes direct demands on us, on our time, on our possessions, especially on our money, when it conflicts with our own wishes – then it can be much harder to do the right thing. Then we find it much harder to model the life of Christ.

And this is why the last part of our Gospel reading is so important. Jesus denounces the crowd as hypocrites. He says: you can look at the sky, and tell what the weather's going to do, you're good at that. But why don't you know the meaning of the present time? Why can't you read the signs of the times? Why can't you tell what's really going on? This question has been exercising me over the last few weeks. What are the signs of our times? And how should we be reacting to them? I have to say that when you stop and think, the signs of our times are deeply troubling.

While other parts of the world have been suffering from the effects of climate change, we have been largely unaffected until recently, when we have begun to experience more extreme weather. The

predictions of those who study weather patterns are frankly alarming. Sadly, many older folk seem to take the view that it won't bother them, and ignore what's happening. As we have seen this year, younger people have taken on board the dangers they are facing and demanding that steps be taken to ensure that they have a habitable planet to live on. It is now decades since the major Aid Agencies, like Oxfam, Tearfund and Christian Aid, saw the signs of what was happening in places like Africa and they started making climate change part of their campaigning. They predicted that, as life became intolerable in certain parts of the world, there would be mass migration to places where crops could still be grown. We are seeing this happen.

Way back in the 1970s some of you may remember the Brandt Report, named after the German Chancellor Willy Brandt, which warned that unless something was done to redress the balance of trade between the rich countries of the North and West (i.e. the US and Europe) and what was then called the 'developing world' or the Third World, then there would be mass emigration from the poor countries to the richer countries. The report advocated fairer trading practices and genuine efforts to empower and enable developing countries to grow *their* economies. Sadly, the report was largely ignored. It was easier for the rich countries to continue as in the past. The idea of Fair Trade has remained a niche interest. The great resources of places like the DRC (Congo) have continued to be exploited, benefiting lots of people apart from those in whose country those resources are found. Our global trade structures continue to favour the rich at the expense of the poor.

Then we look across the Atlantic and see what's happening there. I don't know about you, but the recent Trump rally where the whole crowd was shouting, chanting 'Send them back' about those 4 Democrat women made me shudder. It just reminded me of the Hitler Nazi rallies of the 1930s.

And it was no real surprise that just days later there was yet another mass killing where the victims were mostly Hispanics. What is deeply troubling about that rally and the vicious chanting is that many of those doing it would probably call themselves Christians. And then there was the incident where an American policeman led a man with a rope tied round his neck through the streets of the town where they lived. And over here we have a Prime Minister who refers to some Muslim women as letterboxes. That, for me, is a sign of the lack of respect for other people that has become all too common in our society.

When we have the leaders of so-called civilised countries showing such blatant lack of respect, how can we expect our young people to respect one another? Just last weekend I was hearing about the abuse a 12 year old girl has been subjected to through messages on her mobile phone. The comments made by her so-called friends from her private school were shocking. Even worse, some of the abuse was encouraged by a parent. Our mobile phones and internet can be wonderfully useful tools, but it seems that we are inclined to put things in messages to others that we would never dream of saying to their face. There is a nastiness that has crept in to our communications which is deeply worrying.

There has also been a worrying nastiness in our political discourse these last few years. It has to be said that the whole Brexit issue has not brought out the best in our society. The torrent of abuse and even death threats that our MPs have been subject to is shameful. There is now a shocking violence in our verbal communications. Should we then be amazed when that violence appears in physical form, with gang warfare and knifings? When we start to lose our respect for our fellow human beings, we are in trouble. Loss of respect can so easily turn into violence.

And then there is what is euphemistically referred to as 'fake news' – in other words, lies. What is happening to our idea of truth as a vital part of our interaction with each other? We talk of white lies, of fibs, of porky pies – as if falsehood doesn't really matter. I suspect most of us are guilty of telling lies at some time – possibly to get us out of a tricky situation, to get our own way, possibly through fear of punishment, or rejection. One of the things that always struck me about Gerald was his total commitment to the truth, whatever the cost. I never knew him say something that was untrue, and I really admired him for that. It meant that you knew you could trust him utterly. When lies start creeping in, or fake news starts to circulate, how can we know what or who to trust? It is a dangerous, slippery slope.

I'm aware that this is all rather depressing. But these are surely all signs of the times we are living in. And Jesus calls us to be aware of them, and, where we can, to do something about them. As Gandhi said, 'you must *be* the change that you wish to see in the world.' We are called to challenge what is wrong and to model a different way of being, a way of living which will often be at odds with the world around us, with the society we live in, even at times with our own families. We are called to model our lives on the way of Jesus. Just like the early church, we are called to live as a community in a way that demonstrates respect for all, truthfulness, kindness and compassion. Such things are better caught than taught. We must practise what we preach and give an example of godly living that others will want to find out about and share with us. As examples, I commend to you this week's section in the Mothers' Union prayer diary, about the MU in Iraq and Egypt. As I was writing this sermon, Friday's verse was 'One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts.' Within the church community we have a great opportunity to do just that, to pass on the way of Jesus and to learn from each other. Amen.