

**PENTECOST 10C 14082022** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 5.1-7; Psalm 80.1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11.29 – 12.2; Luke 12.49-59

*Jesus said, 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that 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; they 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.'* 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? And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.'

Some people seem to thrive on excitement and change; they love a challenge, and are not interested in a quiet, peaceful life. Some people want to change the world; they are all too aware of what's wrong with society, the environment, the government, you name it- and they want to DO something about it. Others just want life to carry on peacefully with as little disruption as possible.

The global pandemic has been a huge, disruptive challenge for everyone, changing many aspects of our lives as well as causing sadness, grief, and long-term illness to countless numbers of people. We have all needed to adapt to a greater or lesser degree, and it's been tough.

Which category do you think you might fit into- are you an excitement junkie or an agitator for change, or do you long for peace and a quiet life?

Jesus talked about peace a lot, which is why it is such a shock to read from Luke's gospel today that he said he did not come to bring peace but fire and division to the earth. Why did the Prince of Peace say such a thing?

Looking at the other scriptures we read today might provide some background and understanding for us. Isaiah chapter 5 begins with a kind of love-song for Israel, which is described as a carefully built vineyard, nurtured and protected by the beloved- God. But instead of producing beautiful grapes to make delicious wine, it yielded bitter, wild fruit.

So God threatens to tear down the vineyard- the nations of Israel and Judah- because when God expected justice and righteousness in the land, there was bloodshed and terrified screaming instead.

Psalm 80 uses the same metaphor, picturing Israel as a vineyard that God had brought out of Egypt, lamenting that God seemed to have forgotten them and pleading for mercy.

The history of the Hebrew people as we read it in the Old Testament contains many stories of wars and battles over territory; first, as they left Egypt and eventually conquered other lands, then as King David united and expanded the kingdom. Soon the kingdom split in two and was continually under threat from neighbouring countries and empires.

By the time of Jesus Israel was a small, captive land occupied by the Roman Empire. Some forty years after Jesus, the Romans quashed an uprising and the Temple and much of Jerusalem was destroyed.

The Letter to the Hebrews was written, it is thought, by an unknown author soon after the destruction of the Temple. Last week's section of this letter spoke of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, and today we hear of more examples of faith.

This part of the letter reads like a catalogue of prominent characters from the Old Testament, all of whom met with extreme situations in which faith required endurance. In the face of danger, these heroes of the faith persevered because they trusted in God.

Then the letter describes the persecutions and torture suffered by others who did not live to see the fulfilment of God's promise. The writer aims to encourage his or her readers, who may also be subject to persecution for their faith- reminding us that faithfulness does not exempt us from difficult situations or from suffering.

Some may say that living a faithful, Christian life always leads to blessings and prosperity; but that is to ignore a great deal of scripture and the lived experience of most Christians.

Conversely, some may say that if you experience suffering or poverty or tragedy it is due to your lack of faith; that is cruel, heartless and untrue, only adding distress to those already in distress.

The Letter to the Hebrews encourages us to 'run with perseverance the race that is set before us', following the examples of those faithful people of the past and keeping our eyes on Jesus.

And so we come to those difficult words in Luke's Gospel. Jesus speaks with the passion of a prophet who knows that his words will challenge his listeners. Even those who have followed him from the beginning will not understand why he intends to go to Jerusalem and face the threats to his life- his 'baptism of fire'. Jesus had been teaching about money and possessions, preaching a radically different way of living. He condemned those who grew rich by keeping their workers in poverty, and those religious leaders who enjoyed status and power. He said the first will be last and the last will be first in the upside-down kingdom of God.

Jesus knew this would cause division, as some would embrace his teaching and others would reject it. He challenged people to recognise the signs of the times just as they could recognise changes in the weather. All these scripture readings speak of challenge: the challenge to change ourselves, our society, and ultimately- the world. If all we long for is a quiet life, undisturbed by the world outside, the Christian life is not that. We are called to follow Jesus.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said these words in his final address to the Lambeth Conference this week:

"In history, in Empire, in politics, all too often all churches, not only Anglicans, have got sucked into supporting governments, colluding with injustice and upholding oppression at any and every level. To stand up against oppression is frightening, because it is costly. We don't like it when governments speak forcefully against us – or do worse than that in many parts of the Anglican Communion - yet we must speak, and we must act.

To be silent on the climate emergency and its implications for the economy today, not in 10 years - which is a political expression meaning 'after I've retired'. To be silent on the unethical treatment of migrants or on war or oppression, on the abuse of human rights, on persecution, is to be one of the oppressors. We have a vision that is a picture of the Kingdom. Not greater darkness but spreading light. Not science and technology bankrupt and captured by the powerful but shared and developed for the Common Good for all human beings.

Not masses of people vainly seeking shelter from climate disaster, but generosity, hospitality, effective tackling of the climate emergency led by those who see our world as God's gift, and who take seriously the reconciliation of all things to their creator."

Let us pray that we are up to the challenge and run our race with faith.

The Lord be with you.

<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/speeches/archbishop-canterbury-gives-final-keynote-address-lambeth-conference>