



**Sermon preached by Richard Lewney on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2022**

**Readings:** Jeremiah 23.23-29, Hebrews 11.29-12.2, Luke 12.49-56

### *Uncompromising*

You may know that our church in Bar Hill is currently in pastoral vacancy. And we're reflecting on how to describe where we think God is leading us just now and so to spell out the particular gifting that we might be seeking in a new minister. I imagine you'll know that it's easy for that list to become quite a long one as everyone chips in: so goes the process of discernment together.

But I can tell you what isn't on the list, and it's this: "We're looking for a minister who will bring division rather than peace, someone who will set fathers against sons, and daughters-in-law against mothers-in-law."

In this passage from Luke we see a side of Jesus that may be a bit different from the way we commonly think of him: passionate, provocative, confrontational. Of course, we're familiar with his confrontations with religious leaders. There were plenty of those. And we know that he threw the money-lenders out of the temple courts. But those were clearly the bad guys in the narrative. We can cope with that. As with a film in which the hero we identify with takes extreme measures against the enemy in extreme circumstances so, in our minds, we can just put a 'strong language' warning on those scripture passages to alert those who might be offended.

But in today's passage Jesus seems to be talking firstly to his disciples and then more generally to the crowds and that's more uncomfortable: in that case, we might think he's also speaking to us. So how do we read Luke's account, and how does it fit into the big picture of Jesus' ministry and our call to discipleship?

I'd like to highlight three things about which Jesus is uncompromising in this passage.

Firstly, Jesus is uncompromising in his challenge to the way of the world, a way that will ultimately be destroyed.

'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!'

Fire is familiar as a symbol of purity, of cleansing. God's word exposes fake religion and the self-serving lies of its acolytes. It burns all that away, smashes it to bits, as we read from Jeremiah:

How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back--those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? ... [L]et the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Jeremiah 23.26, 28, 29

John the Baptist knew that the coming Messiah would have that purifying mission:

‘His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

Luke 3.17

All that is corrupt, anything that has no eternal value, however imposing it may seem today, will be overcome, annihilated. It cannot survive in the kingdom of God that is inaugurated in Jesus’ victory over sin and death in his crucifixion and resurrection, the ‘baptism’ with which he is to be baptized and whose completion he longs for here.

That’s the first thing about which Jesus is uncompromising: his challenge to the way of the world, a way whose days are numbered.

Secondly, Jesus is uncompromising in what he expects of his disciples: wholehearted commitment to his mission or, in one of his favourite words, faith.

In the parables in Luke 12 that immediately precede this passage, Jesus likens discipleship to the actions of a trustworthy slave who carries out their duty thoroughly when the master is absent. That’s the real test: what does the servant do when no one’s watching. What happens when the doors are closed and the CCTV is switched off. And the word Jesus uses to describe that kind of trustworthy slave is ‘faithful’. Someone who can be trusted to fulfil their responsibilities, to carry out their calling, to keep on keeping on. That’s the kind of faithfulness demonstrated by the long list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. They trusted God for what they could not see (as it were, while for them the master was absent) and they acted on that trust.

And in the passage that we read today, Jesus puts his disciples on the alert for difficult times. He uses language that evokes the prophet Micah (Chapter 7) who spoke into a time of crisis for the people of God:

Put no trust in a friend,  
have no confidence in a loved one;  
guard the doors of your mouth  
from her who lies in your embrace;  
for the son treats the father with contempt,  
the daughter rises up against her mother,  
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
your enemies are members of your own household.  
When that day comes, the text continues...  
as for me, I will look to the Lord,  
I will wait for the God of my salvation;  
my God will hear me.

Micah 7.5-7

And just as God’s messengers confronted false prophets who proclaimed ‘Peace, peace when there is no peace’, Jesus challenges his followers to remain faithful at the times when faith and a quiet life cannot be reconciled, just as those heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 did.

‘Do you think that I have come to bring peace? No, I tell you, but rather division!’

Now, I have to admit that I’m quite a fan of the quiet life. My natural tendency is to seek that out, to avoid unnecessary conflict (or, sometimes, to avoid any conflict whether necessary or

not). That kind of personality makes me less likely to escalate conflict through retaliation to some perceived offence, but it also makes me more likely to back off from wholehearted commitment to the kingdom of God if I think it will disturb my peaceful life.

So Jesus is uncompromising (a) in his challenge to the way of the world, whose days are numbered, and (b) in the wholehearted commitment that he expects of his disciples, even in the face of painful conflicts.

Thirdly, Jesus is uncompromising about the urgency of his call. How, he asks of the crowd, how could you possibly miss the signs of the times? You're so good at reading the weather signs. You know the cloud coming in on the west wind means that rain's coming from the Mediterranean. You know that when the south wind picks up it will bring fierce heat from the desert. But you can't recognise the signs of the crisis that is about to engulf you, and you reject the offer of life that God is making in me. We recall Jesus weeping at the sight of Jerusalem in Luke 19 and anticipating the destruction of the city and the temple by the Romans in AD70:

[T]he days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'

Luke 19.43-44

Every generation has its own signs of the times to interpret. Take a moment to think what signs you would pick out from our times. ... Of course, we need to be careful not to baptize our own agenda as God's. It seems to be a sign of our times that autocrats defend their self-serving, illiberal actions on the grounds that they are standing up for supposedly Christian values, making their campaign a holy war. But we believe that God calls us to read our times and to speak and act accordingly, as those who belong not to the kingdom of the world but to the kingdom of God.

So the picture of Jesus that we get from today's reading is perhaps a little different from the way we routinely think of him. 'Meek and mild: as if'. Are there aspects of the way of the world that we accommodate or benefit from, which Jesus says will be burned up? Do we hold back on some aspects of our discipleship because we'd rather have a quiet life? Are we reading the signs of our times to recognise what God is calling us to today, this week, just now?