

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost 14 August 2016

[Isaiah 5: 1-7; Psalm 80: 1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11: 29-12:2; Luke 12:49-59](#) from Vanderbilt

[Proper 15C / Ordinary 20C / Pentecost +13 Aug 14, 2016](#) Text week

Today's gospel is one of those that many of us will know that we've heard before but generally speaking it is not one of the gospel readings that really resonates with us, in fact it almost seems to contradict what we already appreciate from those parts of the gospel that do resonate with us.

On the surface the reading seems to be divisive and judgemental, two characteristics we're all too familiar with in the present world, but not characteristics we expect to hear from the words of Jesus.

It is perhaps helpful for us to appreciate that Luke has presented us with five sayings attributed to Jesus; this is not one piece of teaching but a collection that the gospel writer has brought together. And that can be helpful in that it invites us to look more closely at each of the individual sayings rather than trying to make sense of what initially looks like one very knotted piece of teaching.

So let's run through the text and separate out the different parts.

The first saying is quite confrontational:

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

We are familiar with the destruction brought by fire, but this saying takes on a different meaning when we consider the context of fire for the original gospel audience.

Fire was both a symbol of God, as in the iconic 'burning bush'; and also a well-known process for refining precious metals; and that gives a more subtle and creative appreciation of what Jesus was saying.

In this saying the ministry of Jesus is revealed, he came as a divine Word to refine the past religious traditions, to purify the temple that no longer reflected the Word of God in the culture and society of the day; he came to bring about change!

It is with a clever irony that Luke places a saying relating to baptism immediately after this first saying, for baptism is always associated with water, that which quenches the fire, and perhaps that's why we find these seemingly contrasting sayings so confusing.

The second saying does in fact reinforce the sense of ministry that we discovered in the first saying;

"50 I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

There is a real sense of "stress" in the saying that was obvious to the writer of Luke and so an explanatory note is added:

"Jesus is under great "stress" until his "baptism" is completed in suffering death and being raised again."

And that explanatory note also clarifies the full extent of the ministry Jesus spoke of, and so too our ministry.

The 'refining fire' of the first saying speaks of a practical, on-the-ground ministry; the day-to-day reality of working to bring about change; and the 'water of baptism' of the second saying provides an orientation toward "*being raised again*"; it identifies that our ministry, our working for the refining of creation, has a value and purpose that goes beyond our allotted life-span.

And just as we contemplate the whole idea of a stressful ministry and of our future role in terms of time, life and the scope of eternity, we are given two more sayings; one that underlines the "stress" associated with our refining work, and the other that again brings time into focus.

"51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, 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 her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Again we are confronted by the idea that Jesus has a ministry that looks to be divisive; however when we more fully appreciate that he reveals a new order and a new understanding of inclusive 'common humanity', we might contemplate more fully what he is saying.

Obviously we all know about the conflicts and divisions that always seem to accompany change, whether at home, in the church or in society in general; even moving a chair or a cross in the church can cause great angst and division; but we would be wrong to write off this saying with so trivial an understanding.

Jesus speaks of disturbing the 'peace'; of unsettling the settled; his vision opens a new paradigm that takes us beyond the primitive understanding of 'family' that we still hold on to.

Perhaps we'll understand this refining ministry if we recall another cameo from the life of Jesus in Matthew's gospel:

"⁴⁶ While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" [Matthew 12: 46-50]

There are signs that we are culturally evolving, slowly, into a new and more open understanding of family and of relationships in general; however we still have a long way to go before we also can embrace the new paradigm revealed in Christ.

Most people, and cultures, and religious teachings, hold on to a primitive, tribal understanding of family that does not resonate with what the gospels reveal. We have almost a built in understanding that 'blood is thicker than water'; we hang on to our families as if they are the most

important extensions of ourselves; they are our tribe, our belonging and the place where we are most settled.

Hanging on to our families, and our inheritance is the greatest contributor to maintaining the gap between rich and poor; and Jesus offers us a view beyond that primitive understanding.

“And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

We’ve yet to embrace this gospel, we still hang on to our settled past; and yet somehow we know that the outcomes of what we hang on to are not what we want. The troubled world of today, like it was when the writer of Luke’s gospel gathered these sayings together, is very much in need of a refining change; and today we’re invited to contemplate our part in it.

The next saying almost anticipates our unwillingness to change:

“54 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. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. 56 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?”

Donald Trump, ISIS, Refugees, these are signs of the times, they are not causes; rather they are the results of our denying the refining fire that Christ reveals; denying the ministry of baptism, and holding on to our tribal inheritance.

And we can all imagine, a very different world that would result from each and all being able to utter the Christ-like” saying for ourselves:

“Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

The final saying from today’s reading once again heralds a dramatic change in the traditional understanding, for like today the normative understanding was that God is the judge; but Jesus offers another paradigm:

“57 “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? 58 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. 59 I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.””

In this saying Jesus paints a negative and uncompromising view of the Old Testament God and compares that view with a clear imperative that we “*judge for yourselves what is right*”.

We are asked to “*make an effort to settle the case*”; whether that case is global warming, the gap between rich and poor, or the selfishness of tribal inheritances, whatever the case we are asked to “*make an effort to settle*” it.

Luke gives us five sayings to contemplate, and they are quite clearly related to our ministry, our belonging and the unfolding of the future
I'm a little surprised that the writer of Luke didn't finish today's reading with Jesus' favourite Robert Frost poem:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening by Robert Frost – Poetry Foundation](#)

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