

In Times of Change - Reflection

Luke 12: 32-40 (Last week's reading)

Luke 12:49-56 (This week's reading)

If we were going to list the "difficult" sayings that are attributed to Jesus, the start of this week's Gospel reading would be right up there. It is the sort of reading that is misused by cults to separate members from their families, and hence many mainstream churches are reluctant to engage with these sorts of readings.

We have fire, and division. In this gospel, fire is consistently used as an image of judgement. Then we have Jesus, who was heralded with angels proclaiming God's peace, now says that he is not here to bring peace. How on earth do we reconcile these images?

Let us go back a little and think about the context in which this gospel was written, because then this division will make sense.

The author wrote around 80CE to an audience who were gentile converts possibly around Antioch, although we do not have a certain location. It is after the fall of Jerusalem, which has the result that Christians have been rejected in the synagogues and they no longer have the protection of being part of a recognised "special" religion that meant they did not have to sacrifice offerings to the emperor as if to a god.

The early church at this point was finding their identity outside of Judaism. On one level, they found themselves blamed for the disaster of 70CE. Prior to this point, there had been an important question asked in Judaism: who or what caused the loss of the temple? With that was also the all-important question of how to preserve what they then had. With this latest destruction of the temple, the rabbis had an answer: it was division. Inherent in this was the accusation at this weird little sect, who called themselves the "people of the way" or "Christians". The Pharisees, who were the surviving religious leaders, formalised what was considered scripture as well as formalising the synagogue prayers to include curses on the heretics (otherwise known as Christians).

And so the early church found themselves in the midst of division and being blamed for division. For those who were Jewish Christians, this raised one set of questions, when they lost their own identity as being part of the Covenant People and what it meant for the Covenant when their own people no longer recognised them. Gentile Christians, on the other hand, were in an in between space. They were no longer part of Judaism either, but in many cases had also been rejected from their own, but different, culture.

The shifts in culture and acceptance were seismic and earth shattering for these people. They were at the point where they had left their old way and had not yet found a new identity. It would have been a frightening time for the people who had experienced it. What would the future hold? Remember what was said just a few verses before in what was last week's Gospel reading?:

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

and

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

So, the first hint is this is a hopeful reading to a struggling community and not a judgemental reading. This might be a small and struggling group, but do not be afraid to stay faithful despite the challenges that are experienced.

The second hint, is about the treasure. What is it that we do treasure? Even when we express it in different ways, if what we treasure is God, as revealed to us in Jesus, then we will emulate the compassion, then we will be heading in the right direction.

The final hint is found in today's reading:

“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.”

This is about generational change – and across our lives we have probably all experienced some level of intergenerational conflict because what we are used to doing changes for the next generation. The traditions we hold dear, the ways we use language, and so many other expressions of our culture change over time, and this can cause conflict between generations.

The change is often most visible in ex-patriot congregations where each wave of migrants want the church as they had experienced it when they left their homeland (and in that case, add on the conflict with generations who are negotiating what it means to grow up in this culture, when their parents were shaped by another culture). Our congregation has a similar issue because we are missing a few generations. When we experience worship in ways that connect to more multi-generational congregations today, it feels foreign because we have not had that impetus to integrate the needs of other generations into how we do worship.

And so, we are called to interpret the times and speak into ways that can be understood by people now – not people who lived when we were young – and isn't that challenging! However, at the end of the day, we – like the early church – have an important message to tell. It is the message that you are loved. God, who calls the people to practice justice, calls us to love and be loved. How will you communicate this message into your week?