

JESUS THE ARSONIST

'I came to bring fire to the earth,' says Jesus (Luke 12.49). No meek and mild Jesus here. Jesus is facing the cross. With blazing power, he will be raised to new life, conquering sin and death.

Is Christ God's arsonist? Is Jesus the instigator of a divisive blaze? He says, 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled... do you think I have come to bring peace on earth? No – division.' As a straight answer I'd say – both!

Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel have usually been seen to have a negative connotation; unity is good, division is bad. But division has been a feature of Christianity from its beginning. Jesus himself constantly confronted and corrected misinterpretations among his own followers. Remember when he addressed his disciples in a storm on the lake, 'O you of little faith.' He corrected the false teachings of the scribes and Pharisees by repeatedly saying, 'You have heard it was said... *but* I say unto you.' Once he put them in their place, 'You're wrong, not knowing the Scriptures or the power of God.' And he corrected Peter's jealousy of John by telling him, 'What if he remains until I come. You follow me.' *'Don't worry your little mind about what I'm doing with anyone else; just worry about your own relationship with me.'*

Jesus announces that it is 'crunch time'. It's time to decide, to take sides at some risk, to be with Jesus or against him. He chides his listeners for their inability to notice that in his very person the world comes to a dangerous moment to decide for or against God's rule. Jesus calls us all to move from our casual conversation about the weather to face the grand drama of the world being played out before our very eyes. Let's think for a moment of Chinese refugees who are applying for asylum this week in the Netherlands because of Christian persecution and of how Egypt failed to act against the victimization of Christians and of another church burned to the ground in Chile.

Fire can be a metaphor for purification. John the Baptist, in foreseeing Jesus as 'baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire', sees fire as judgement. When Jesus says, 'I wish it were already kindled....' his longing for closure is clear – the cross will bring its pain but glory is to follow.

Then his message really hits home.

'I've come to disrupt and confront! From now on, when you find five in a house, it will be –

Three against two, and two against three;

Father against son and son against father;

Mother against daughter and daughter against mother;

Mother-in-law against bride and bride against mother-in-law.'

Even families will be divided because of Jesus. In Israel's life, family relationships are all important. The family provides a support system in a world without a public welfare program. To divide a family is to leave its members on shaky ground socially and economically.

'When you see a cloud...' Jesus moves into the everyday. Jesus has been speaking to his disciples, now he turns to the crowd. A cloud originating over the Mediterranean, promises rain. A south wind, coming from the desert indicates a scorcher. They all must know how to read the signs; it is key to their survival. The word 'hypocrites' is a bit odd - they simply do not know how to interpret the present time. Do we? This passage is key to our spiritual survival.

While we get our weather from the media, the signs about which we are concerned today are largely political and economic. What will the government do that will affect us? Will the new road trouble us? Will stocks go up or down? We are much like the people to whom Jesus was speaking, because they were too interested in signs that would influence their economic future. How deeply do we care about the great spiritual issues of today? We see family disintegration and an industry that promotes violence while protesting efforts to curb its freedom even as it corrupts our children. We see on TV the poor of the world dying of starvation, yet we go to our dinner tables without considering how we might help. We see people of Africa and Russia dying of AIDS and change the channel. Like those of Jesus' time we major in minors and 'don't interpret the time.'

Jesus is the arsonist. He continues to light fires in our world and it may be not long before the fires of Christian persecution come to our favoured land – I mean, Islamic believers are already a target. We could be next.

But there is another fire that we crave to be relit in our lives.

'O thou who camest from above,
the pure celestial fire to impart
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart.

There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze
and trembling to its source return
in humble prayer and fervent praise

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work and speak and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up thy gift in me.'

Charles Wesley 1707-1788

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