

Sermon for 17th August 2025, Pentecost 10

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Sermon

This is not a particularly happy gospel reading for most preachers. How do we explain why our Lord, who has for some time been preaching a message of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, suddenly declares that he has come to bring fire and division to the earth, which will set people against each other, even within families? Having frequently offered Jesus's message of repentance and reconciliation as a healing balm for fractured communities and shattered lives, how do I now make sense of a teaching that claims it will result in alienation and division?

I think the first thing to say is that these sayings are almost certainly descriptive rather than prescriptive. Jesus is not saying that it's his goal to bring division, but that this is the inevitable outcome when some people accept his message, and others do not.

Consider his parable of the Prodigal Son. On the face of it, that's a story about the reconciliation between a father and his wayward son. The son realises he has made a big mistake in his life choices, the father offers him unconditional forgiveness, and harmony is restored... except that it isn't. The elder brother, the one who did right, is outraged at both father and son and a new rift in the family appears. Peace between father and younger son leads to new division between father and elder son. The father didn't see that coming. It wasn't his intent, yet it was the inevitable consequence of him forgiving someone that someone else thought should be punished.

Much of humanity cannot stand to see someone getting away with something for which we feel they should be punished. We do not like it when those we deem undeserving receive abundant grace. Those who worked hard to follow rigid social and moral rules are often outraged when others disregard them and suffer no consequence.

In this sense, everything that Jesus is doing is likely to cause division somewhere. He forgives and heals the unforgiveable and the broken, and the Pharisees complain that he has no right, and especially not on the Sabbath. He throws the moneychangers out of the temple and the chief priests plot to have him arrested and killed. He declares that he has no intention of being king of the Jews in worldly terms, but only in the Kingdom of Heaven, and Judas is so let down he betrays Jesus for a bag of silver.

There is nothing that anyone can do or say in this world with the best of intentions that won't result in somebody somewhere feeling it's an attack on them. Even if you protest for something as seemingly ethically reasonable as an end to starvation in Gaza, you can be sure that there will still be people who will see you as fundamentally deluded at best, and downright evil at worst.

I remember a few years ago when Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg was still just 16, she travelled across the Atlantic on a sailing yacht to a climate conference at the United Nations in New York to avoid taking a polluting plane flight. She accepted that one person not flying hardly made any difference but argued that her aim was to inspire others, and to demonstrate alternatives to air travel. But – oh! – the divisions that caused! A millionaire casually hoped that Greta's yacht might sink on the journey. A talk radio host told Greta with glee that she had just booked flights for her family for summer sun with zero guilt, so there. And when her message of reconciliation with the planet and each other later extended to protests against starvation in Gaza, and an attempt this past

June to take food supplies in by boat, Donald Trump called her “strange and angry,” and mainstream European politicians called her antisemitic.

We also heard in our earlier reading from Hebrews the sort of troubles and persecutions the early church experienced simply by refusing any longer to live according to the comfortable established hierarchies of the Roman empire. Torture and flogging, chains and imprisonment; stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword, made destitute, persecuted, tormented. This is what happens if your way of life implicitly or explicitly criticises the powers that be.

Both our New Testament readings – especially these harsh sayings of Jesus – remind us that he did not come to validate the social realities and values our society has constructed for itself. Such values have a tendency, after all, to favour the establishment and those who hold positions of power, at the expense of the powerless, marginal and expendable. Even humble Churches, like our own, prefer to be respectable and avoid uncomfortable controversies where possible.

And I’ve found it’s so easy to drift into comfortable conformity as we get older. When I was thirty, I dreamed of being an eco-warrior and living in the woods with Swampy and the rest. I stayed with an eco-community in a Dartmoor woodland and joined them on protests against genetically modified food. I was inspired by vegan friends to give up meat for years. I sold my car and took the bus and train everywhere. When I turned 40, I tried being a nun, leaving the world of ambition and wealth entirely. But living simply and communally is very hard, like sailing against the wind, especially if hardly anyone else is doing it. As I get older, I find I like a comfortable home and a nice, modern car, and the latest laptop, all made using energy and resources that are weakening the environment and poisoning the planet.

But in this gospel passage, Jesus reminds us all not to get comfortable in our various religious and political clubs. Is our church a pleasant place to be only for people who are like us? Do we want to keep everything the same because it’s

what makes *us* content, nostalgic and comfortable? Do we find ourselves making excuses as to why nothing can ever change, or if it does change, why it can certainly not be improved?

Perhaps we are mentally saying to Greta Thunberg, “Ah, we all felt like that when we were young. When you’re older you’ll understand. You can’t expect us to give up our comforts and our security, whether great or small, not even for the pearl of great price. Even the hippies of Woodstock – 56 years ago today – settled down eventually. ‘The times they are a-changing,’ they sang – but they didn’t, in the end.”

But this is not the kind of comfortable peace that Jesus brings. It’s not the kind of peace that praises the status quo and says that we should all know our place. It’s not the kind of peace that says, ‘God has put our leaders in charge, so we must never quibble with anything they do or say’. Instead, Jesus – who was executed aged just 33 by the way – continually brings division and conflict to the comfortable ways that things have always been done for the benefit of comfortable people.

“You hypocrites!” Jesus says, at the end of his diatribe. ‘You know exactly what is going on, and yet do nothing. You know exactly the consequences of your way of life and political choices on the weak, the powerless, the poor and oppressed, and you do nothing. You say fine words and call for peace, but hoard your wealth, power, and influence, at the expense of the suffering and the starving, at the expense of the whole world, and you do nothing.’

This is why Jesus says he has come to bring division. Afflicting the comfortable is the inevitable consequence of his mission to comfort the afflicted.

But don’t worry, I mostly preach to myself. Mostly. But those who do have ears to hear, let them hear.