

Kindle the Fire

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Jeremiah 23.23-29, Luke 12.49-59

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Luke 12.49

At a meditation service I used to attend in Fremantle years ago these words were used as a chant – ‘I came to bring fire, to bring fire, to bring fire to the earth, O how I wish it were already kindled.’ Reading these words again this week, I found myself repeating them as a sort of mantra – not the sort of mantra to still the heart and silence the mind but the sort of mantra to stir the heart and focus the mind on things to be done.

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

The words are also a cry of frustration and yearning – it takes a lot to get people moving, even when it is obvious that the time for action has come – “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” Jesus pleads with us. In our own time, even when the state of the earth itself is the very thing that is shouting out for our attention, and we cannot plead ignorance about the troubles of folk around the world, or in our own society, we tend to be very slow to recognise and then to effectively respond to what is going on. Even looking inward, we can be quite sluggish in responding to danger signs in our own psyche, alerting us to the need to awaken, or to move on, to grow up, or even just to rest. While it might be nice to linger on that last point, rest really is not the theme of today’s gospel! But neither is it simply a call to ignite the fire in our belly – the fire Jesus speaks of is also a purifying and scorching fire.

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

Bringing these first two verses together, the expression ‘baptism of fire’ comes to mind – we now often say this to refer to a less than gentle introduction to something new – and in a way this still reflects the probable origin of the phrase in John the Baptist’s words near the beginning of the gospels of Matthew and Luke:

"I baptize you with water, but One more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:16)

The Holy Spirit, in the scriptures, is said to be like a dove, but also like fire. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, according to Luke, “in bodily form like a dove.” (Luke 3.22); and in the story of Pentecost, alights like tongues of fire upon each one gathered in the upper room. So, on the one hand we have the gentle dove of hope and new life, and many words of peace - Jesus is the Prince of Peace, who offers us the living water, who asks us to turn the other cheek, who promises to lead our feet in the way of peace, and to leave us the peace of the Holy Spirit the Comforter. But on the other hand, here we have Jesus saying “Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No I tell you, but rather division!” Matthew’s version is even stronger – Jesus has come not to bring peace but a sword (Matthew 10.34) – a sharp instrument of division.

So how do we reconcile these two opposites? We can’t just say that gentle Jesus has momentarily lost his temper – we need to understand how a life of the spirit is comprised of both doves and swords, water and fire. So, we must look at this most difficult prophecy concerning the dividing of households – three against two, father against son, mother against daughter, and so on. Some have taken this passage somewhat literally to explain how the decision to be a Christian will inevitably cause division in families. Growing up, I knew a family who all attended a mild-mannered Anglican Church. But one of the sons-in-law became a fervid fundamentalist preacher and took family gatherings as an opportunity to try and persuade the rest of the family of the error of their ways, and to make a decision to follow Christ in a particular way. In the end, his mother-in-law had to ban all talk of religion from her house because of the upset and awkwardness it caused. A similar wedge was also driven between friends.

I really don’t think this is the type of division Jesus is suggesting we make in his name. Firstly, I think Jesus is describing what will happen if we follow a certain path, rather than telling us to create division at every opportunity. Secondly, families in Jesus’ world stand for a set of values and tribal identity, including religious identity, and are often invested in wealth retention and land ownership. While this might still be true to some degree in our world, a closer parallel might be found in our allegiances to social expectations and mindsets that support our consumer lifestyle. Perhaps some of us have at least felt the disapproval or incomprehension of others for making life decisions that were not in our best financial interests. Or, on the positive side, have had people secretly confide that they wish they could be so brave. Which reminds me of the classic scenes in *Yes Minister* when the PM proposes a bold

sweeping reform, and then flies into a panic when Sir Humphrey observes that it's "a very brave decision, Prime Minister." – "Is it?!"

From the outset, Jesus had asked some people to leave possessions, and expectations behind – to leave a static life for an uncertain future on the open road. He does not reject 'family' but asks us to put the values of the kingdom first, then all else will fall into its rightful place. Change will inevitably meet resistance and rejection and upset power relationships and hierarchies. If we think of all the stories of Jesus' encounters with others – just about all entail a kind of transformation, or a choice that others might find hard to understand. Jesus' own hometown, and even his own family at one point thought he had gone mad.

And so, the great question we might ask ourselves is not: how does my faith set me apart from others, but rather, have I allowed my faith to divide and unsettle me?: Am I open to transformation and healing or a change in direction? Do I live in such a way that others might be transformed and healed? Or do I refuse to kindle the fire? Do I refuse to kindle the fire because I want to keep the peace? But what sort of peace is this?

In Michael Cunningham's book made into a film, *The Hours*, he has the writer Virginia Woolf say, "You cannot find peace by avoiding life." I think Jesus is saying something like this – he gets us to consider two types of peace. One is a superficial kind of peace that might be won through unhappy compromise or passive assent, by not rocking the boat or upsetting anybody, or not saying or doing those things we ought to say and need to do. This kind of peace is, in the terms of this morning's gospel, a kind of hypocrisy. We know what is wrong, but we do nothing to change it. The cost of doing nothing is dire – you lose your freedom and pay a heavy price. This is the false 'peace' that needs, in the words of Jeremiah, the fiery word of God to sweep through it, or a hammer taken to it, to break it into pieces.

There is, though, a much deeper and freeing kind of peace in being broken open by the honest claims of heart and conscience. This might be costly - as Christ's gift to us is costly – but it brings true peace and wholeness. Just as some kinds of bushland need fire in order to clear away dead wood and allow seeds to germinate, so we might find a more lasting peace if we kindle the Christ fire that not only stirs us into action and clears away all that holds us back from a full, self-giving, and brave life, but also causes new life to spring up in its wake.

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