

## TREASURE MAPS – Luke Knight

A Face Like Fire | Luke 12:49-59 | May 29, 2022

LWC May 29, 2022

Luke 12:49-59: *A Face Like Fire*

Years ago, Mel Gibson made a film called "The Passion of the Christ". No Jesus movie gets things exactly right, but it was a fresh take on a character whose portrayals are often clichéd. It was and is a powerful film. When my father saw it, "The Passion of the Christ" was the straw that broke the camel's back on his way to faith. After watching, my dad broke down in tears and for the first time gave himself entirely to God. But as powerful as the film was, it was also controversial because it showed Jesus' arrest, torture and death with more realism than ever before on screen. Some called it a grotesque overemphasis of violence, others called it antisemitic, and a few found it difficult to follow as the movie came with subtitles, the dialogue being versions of the first century languages of Palestine. Everyone seemed to have an opinion – even on film Jesus is unavoidably provocative. A friend of mine, on the other hand, found the movie challenging for another reason. It wasn't the gore, shock or subtitles. For her, Jesus was distracting. The actor cast was a devout Catholic, but piety didn't stop him from also being very handsome by Hollywood's standards. He appeared much different as Jesus, of course: makeup, long hair, beard, even brown contact lenses to cover his dazzling blue eyes. All that considered, my friend still protested. "I don't know what to tell you, Luke," she said "all I know is that when Jesus is very handsome it's a bit confusing. Jesus is too dreamy."

In movies, in books, in our imaginations, we tend to style God in our own image. Try as we might to see clearly, we all have to come to Jesus admitting that we've probably cast someone else in his role. God might fully know us, but we have to get to know God. Which is why our study of the biographies of Jesus, the gospels, is crucial. No matter how well meaning, it doesn't take us long to make God into something he isn't. Surely God's like me; surely God thinks like I think, votes like I vote; surely God is assertive or accommodating like me, or at least like someone I might like to know. We often look at God as if we're looking in the mirror. But we're not looking in the mirror when seeing Jesus, we're looking into another face. There may be some family resemblance, but Jesus is not a reflection of me, God is not made in our image, we are made in God's. So it's important to pay attention and to keep taking another look.

I share all this because as we heard, today's passage sounds a little abrasive. Just moments ago Jesus has been like we like him to be – reassuring is that God will take care of us if we'll only trust him. Those are warming words, about provision and care, and rightly so. Jesus is soothing and settling. But then Jesus goes off script. He begins to sound less like a throw pillow, and more like a protest poet. Controversial, disturbing even. "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

There's a good deal of prophetic and poetic language from Jesus here involving fire, family, fair weather, bad weather, and then a metaphor about settling a grievance on the way to court. Zooming out, two phrases might highlight what's happening around Jesus' words and actions in a passage like this. What we're hearing is that Jesus divides, and Jesus provokes decision.

When someone is described as divisive figure, we might hear that as a negative quality, especially in environments we hope are harmonious. But stopping a moment to think about it, we

know that division isn't always negative. Divisive persons are protesting and paying the price with their lives in Russia these last months. Divisive or "problematic" people were at the forefront of change for various civil rights movements and still are. Confronting and challenging isn't always wrong, it all depends on what you're facing. Which is why we all need a good deal of humility and self-awareness when tempted to cause a ruckus, because disturbance for its own sake is of course unhelpful. If we just want a fight wherever we go, we might simply be wounded, hell bent on inflicting pain on others because we're in pain. If we only see the negative or downside in every interaction, we might need to consider how that posture influences those around us. What I mean is, there's a time and place for division and challenge, and plenty of times and places where it's unhelpful or harmful. And when we experience what feels like harmful division, we can begin by asking, "where is and what is the pain or problem?" and begin there together.

Jesus, we have to say, isn't coming from a harmful place, nor a wounded or damaged position. Jesus brings division another way. As we're told in the gospels, he speaks with truth and an unusual authority. He speaks with truth, like the protestor in Russia, but even that doesn't get us very far, because Jesus isn't on the side of truth. The gospels lead us to believe that Jesus is the truth, and the world's ultimate authority, which is why he often sounds so strange to his first listeners. It seems no one talked like Jesus talked – there was something decidedly confident about him which people couldn't ignore. So, Jesus is divisive because of who he is, not so much because of what he believes. If he is God walking among his people, then Jesus is the ground of all reality and authority, challenging humans around him to step out of the shadow of unreality. That's part of what's going on in this passage. God among his people, holding out reconciliation and healing, but being met with stubborn rejection.

So you could say that Jesus can't help but be divisive because the truth can never come in line with untruth in his person. It's no use Jesus pretending to be God (kind of), nor the God we'd like him to be should we drop him into our Amazon shopping cart. As we said earlier, Jesus isn't made in our image; we're made in his. So the division Jesus brings, the fire, is a fire that causes us to face who God really is and who we really are. This is why Jesus is not the cuddliest figure in human history, much as we'd like him to be, but the most controversial figure in history. A figure who divides and provokes decision. The Jesus of the gospels (rather than the movies) doesn't offer good advice, he brings good news, as one writer puts it. And the good news is a reality check, it's information, that God has done something about the problem of sin and death through the life and death and life again of Jesus – the baptism Jesus speaks of in this passage, the road to the cross ahead. So Jesus is divisive in the sense that he can't deny the life and truth within him, and what he's come to do. His listeners can accept that reality, accept him or reject him.

So Jesus is divisive, but not overbearing. As we said, Jesus provokes decision, but he doesn't twist arms. In this passage we can hear him not only proclaiming, but reasoning, even pleading, in his efforts to get the truth across. You can tell about the weather, can't you see who is standing in front of you now? You know a judgement is coming (something not at all lost on his first century Jewish audience given the tension with their Roman occupiers), so why wouldn't you settle the problem before it's too late? Jesus is very aware of the dangerous game Israel is playing with Rome. If they want to oust the Romans by human efforts, by playing Rome's game, they're not going to win. Jesus is warning of danger ahead.

There are some who are turning and accepting the truth, but some aren't, but with a prophetic voice unlike any other, Jesus has not given up on them. For the sake of the creatures he made and loves, he won't be shuffled off the self-help section. In him is life to the full and he wants life for his whole creation. So he provokes decision. But, as our friend Rikk Watts has shared so often over the years, Jesus doesn't force people into anything. He really does let us choose. Of course, that choice must involve our knowledge of the facts and Jesus doesn't spare his first listeners the facts in order to make a decision. As one writer said of this passage, not waking someone up when

they've fallen asleep at the wheel would be silly and dangerous. Sometimes the most loving thing to do is be brutally honest – wake up – make the right decision! So these are not cold, hard facts. This is truth and life and warmth from the person who touched the untouchable, loved the unlovable, and gave his full attention to the ignored. Jesus may be controversial and divisive, but pleads and bleeds with his life that those who hear him would choose to trust him and go his way rather than their own.

So Jesus is divisive and provokes decision, but so we don't get the wrong idea by looking at just one passage of scripture today, we should also remember Jesus is also full of patience. When we read God's history with his people, we have to say there is more kind patience in God than harsh provocation. God doesn't appear to be in a great rush with his children in scripture, unless there is imminent danger lurking. And that patience is what we still experience today by the consistent guidance of his Holy Spirit. In my experience, for what it's worth, God doesn't so much use the microwave, but the slow cooker, in my development. So, though Jesus provokes and urges decision, the ancient and unfathomable patience of God is also at work in our world still. The LORD is not rude and harsh. Easily annoyed and a bit thin on kindness. The LORD is gracious and compassionate. Slow to anger and rich in love. Lord Jesus, show us that way to be ourselves.

We like to think we know how God should get our attention or get things done. Jesus' first disciples certainly did. John's gospel holds that dramatic story of the transfiguration, where Jesus radiates in all his glory on the side of the mountain, and only Peter, James and John witness the event. They then come up with a great idea! Why don't you show off like that for everyone! Really sell it! Get up in front of the leaders, the armies, the whole crowd at city center and if you overwhelm them they'll have to follow and obey. But Jesus' face is unlike the faces of the Roman emperors, or the rulers in Jerusalem. Jesus won't overpower or coerce. Besides, demonstrations of power don't always produce obedience. The Israelites saw the mighty deeds of the Exodus, had the seas parted, food and water provided for them in the desert by God himself. And they still often went their own way, still thought they were better at God's job than God. Now, here in Jesus, we see the full picture of God's character in one humble and sacrificial life. We might want a Hollywood version of God, a version of us that's more impressive, more attractive, more assertive or more accommodating like us. But God's face does not look like our face. So when Jesus speaks of fire, family, fair and bad weather, he's speaking plainly to a people who have refused to look at God's face, or hear God's voice. I'm standing right here – take a closer look. Do they recognize their God among them, can they hear his voice?

Do we see God's face or hear God's voice with us now? That really is the question for a community of Christians, isn't it? Are we fixated on our own reflection, rather than following God's direction? Do we listen to that sometimes inconvenient voice, will we look again at that strange face that is unlike our face? When we go along with the times, never questioning what we're spoon-fed by corporate or political interest, we're in danger of ignoring the one still among us now. When we refuse to face pain together and to forgive one another, we're in danger of shutting out God's voice, of forgetting God's face. When we take little to no interest in aligning our choices with God's character, with generosity, humility, integrity, we're in danger of scrunching up our eyes and walking blindly into walls. When we gloss over problems in our families or neighbourhoods or church, we deny the truth God can't deny. As we hear elsewhere from John, how can we say we love God or know God if we do not love one another? It's easier than you might think to ignore signs, to avoid decision, to shuffle the voice of the Holy Spirit off to the self-help section when the demands are put on us to do the right thing. Sometimes it's hard to face facts, it's hard to look into the face of Jesus. It might cause division within us, even feeling a little skirmish inside: pride verses Jesus, selfishness verses Jesus, fear verses Jesus, self-protection verses Jesus. It might get awkward between us, when we have to own up to our shortcomings, or admit we've done damage we didn't intend. We might have to say now and then "you know I don't think I was reflecting Jesus the other day when we had that little moment, can we talk about it?" We might even have to say, "you know I don't feel you reflected Jesus the

other day when we had that little moment, can we talk about it?" That's not easy stuff, but if we want to get on together with Jesus, loving honesty is the best policy.

When we face Jesus daily, all his life, all his truth; when we face ourselves daily, all our wrongheadedness, our proclivity for failure, we can accept what we need to and be healed. We can accept that we do not know the way to be human and need to be told and show the way. We accept that our faces are like shifting shadows, inconsistent and a bit shady. Jesus isn't. Jesus' face is full of fire. His brightness guides us, his flame purges us. And our best course of action as a persons and communities is to stare into the fire and let our own faces then become illuminated.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- How does a passage like this challenge some of our "versions" of Jesus?
- What did you take away from this passage and teaching?
- What do you think a passage like this holds for us today (as a person, a family or a church community)?