

Our four readings today from Isaiah, Psalm 80, the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Gospel of Luke have a connection among them that is rather more obvious than is often the case with our Sunday readings. Isaiah and the Psalm use the allegory of the vine and vineyard to represent Israel. *You have brought a vine out of Egypt;* but in both cases the vine or the whole vineyard disappoints and each is cursed. They produce only wild grapes which are small and very sour and of no value to the winemaker. We are, of course not talking about actual grapes; they are a metaphor for Israel and Judah who have not lived up to God's purpose in delivering them up out of Egypt. The connection to both Hebrews and Luke is not about allegorical grapes, the connection is to disappointment and to failure and to the consequences which result. Human failure to be true to God's purpose is a common theme throughout the entire Bible as are the consequences. By the way, let us be clear those consequences are not God's punishment, they are entirely self-inflicted. Our Hebrew scripture readings this morning were written in the 700's BCE. The reading from the Letter to the Hebrews was written in the 60's of the CE and Luke was written in the 80's of the CE, so there is a spread of some 800 years, but a common theme: humanity falls short and suffers as a result.

Let me say something about the Letter to the Hebrews. First of all, the author is unknown. It was often attributed to Paul, but most scholars believe that is entirely unlikely for a variety of reasons including the Greek is simply too elegant and too polished compared to the texts of the letters that are known incontrovertibly to be from Paul. I get the assessment of too elegant to be from Paul. Before reading a text in a service, I spend more time going over passages from Paul's letters than any other biblical texts. His syntax is often downright awkward.

A variety of authors for Hebrews have been proposed by scholars but none have been proven. Origen the 3<sup>rd</sup> century theologian said the following: *I would say that the matter is the Apostle's that is Paul's but the phraseology and construction are those of someone who remembered the Apostle's teaching and wrote his own interpretation of what his master had said.* Even in English translation Hebrews reads as a so much more polished text even though the theology is Paul's.

Scholars believe that the Letter to Hebrews was a letter to the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. It was clearly written before the year 70 of the CE in that it alludes to priestly practices in the Temple and makes no mention of the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. Although in other parts of the Mediterranean there were communities of Gentile followers of Jesus, In Jerusalem, Jewish followers of Jesus were a sect of Temple Judaism, although by the 60's there were tensions between those who followed and those who rejected Jesus. Those tensions would not come to a head until after the Temple's destruction. In any event the Letter to the Hebrews was written at least 30 years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Our passage this morning comes at the end of section reviewing the faith of the heroes of Israel. The section begins as follows: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.* That quote could be the subject for more than one homily. The passage is followed by a recitation of the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses. In our passage we have a summary list of later heroes: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets.

Our passage concludes with the example of Jesus and an exhortation: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

This is a message for those mid-first century Jewish Christians rooting their faith in the faith of all the great in Jewish history culminating in Jesus. The author was perhaps anticipating the struggles that were still nascent but would burst forth shortly into major violent upheaval.

In 66 of the CE, there was a major revolt of Jews against Rome in Judea which was brutally met by Rome but, the revolt was reinvigorated over the next several years. Eventually in the summer of the year 70 of the CE, Rome mounted a huge campaign against Judea killing tens of thousands, driving many into exile, and destroying much of the city including the second temple. The entire priestly cohort was murdered. For a thousand years Judaism had been entirely focused on the Temple. Until the first destruction by Babylon in 586, it was the home of the Ark of the Covenant. The entire religion was based on rites practiced in the Temple and required the priests who were essential to the religion. The dislocation was complete and devastating. Judaism was rescued by the Pharisees and completely recast into what we have known for 2,000 years as Rabbinic Judaism. In the climate of great disruption Rabbinic Judaism became very codified and very strict against anything that smacked of heresy. The fact that there were Jewish Christians who believed that Jesus was the Messiah became one of the worst heresies. Put yourself in the position of a Jew completely in shock in a destroyed city. How could

the Messiah whose coming was to herald universal peace have appeared in the midst of such death and destruction?

It is into this world that Luke sometime in the early to mid 80's wrote his Gospel. He wrote in the Syrian city of Antioch. Luke was either a very Hellenized Jew or most probably a Gentile because by his time there were many Gentile Christian communities. Our passage this morning flies in the face of much that we expect to hear of Jesus – so much for *Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild*. But when you understand the desperate conditions throughout the Levant with successive rebellions against Rome each one put down more viciously than the previous, Jesus' statement reported by Luke makes sense. Don't forget that Luke is writing some 50 years after Jesus ascended into heaven. Luke is writing of a prediction that Jesus, may or may not, have made that has in fact already been realized. Luke is not writing history. He was interpreting Jesus' teaching in the context of the world in which he lived. Fire has, indeed, come. Division is rife as Jewish believers in Jesus were barred from worship in Rabbinic Judaism. Families, neighbours, fellow sufferers under Rome were divided from each other. Quite literally, *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.* Worshiping Jesus or rejecting Jesus was the cause of the division.

Despite the setting of destruction, division, and desolation, it is important to give some consideration to the opening line of our Gospel passage: *I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!* To have any understanding of this line, one must understand the way fire is used in the Bible. It can be a sign of God's presence and power: God appeared to Moses in the burning

bush. God led the children of Israel through the wilderness with a pillar of fire. In Hebrews just after the passage we heard read this morning the following appears: *...let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.* Fire can be seen as purification and refinement, judgement and wrath, light, and a sign of spiritual warfare. The line from our reading that has Jesus here to bring fire has all the elements of the different ways fire is seen in the Bible. If this passage was written to be literal truth it would be cruel beyond imagining. But it is not the cheap goods of literal truth! It is spiritual, mythic, and metaphoric truth that is infinitely more powerful than this happened, that happened, and then something else happened. But we live in a literal age. We must sharpen our capacity for real truth telling and mythic and spiritual understanding.

By the way, while I was writing the passage on fire, it occurred to me how well we as British Columbians should understand the multiple natures of fire. We now know that if we had followed the Indigenous practices of controlled burning, we would have been spared many of disastrous, out-of-control wildfires that have so devastated the landscape and communities across this province and beyond.

So what does all this mean for us some two millennia later. Well I think the most important part of this passage for us is: *You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?* Do we have slightest clue on how to interpret our time? Let us consider a few facts about our time.

- People in Ukraine, Gaza, the West Bank, Sudan, Myanmar are experiencing war and destruction at least as bad as that Rome inflicted on Jerusalem in 70.

- Never in modern times has the monopoly on wealth of so few compared to the want of so many been so stark and beyond comprehension.
- On our own island, a family of four, for the most basic of existences, both parents must work 40 hours a week and each make \$26.30 an hour for a total of \$110,000 a year. How many jobs on the island pay \$55,000 a year for each of those two parents?
- Social isolation and loneliness are widespread, with around 16% of people worldwide – one in six – experiencing loneliness. While the latest estimates suggest that loneliness is most common among adolescents and younger people....(World Health Organization)
- Certain aspects of climate change are already irreversible, but the country that is the world's greatest emitter of greenhouse gases has pulled out of the Paris agreement and is withdrawing funding for research in green technologies.
- Fighting over religion remains a sad reality, but the fighting has been rendered fiercer than ever by demonization of the other. I can't disagree with you unless I am evil.
- Demonization within religious conflict is bad enough, it has now spread to politics. Democratic compromise is seen as weakness. Disagreement with the President or Prime Minister becomes criminal. Pardon the rich, criminalize the poor. And political discussions even among members of a family have become impossible or fraught with violence. Division is, indeed, here.
- The Bureau of the Atomic Scientists earlier this year moved the Doomsday Clock forward. It is now 89 seconds to midnight the closest it has been since the clock was founded in 1947. Think of

it, in about the same time it will take me to conclude this homily, we could be vaporized and human and most other forms of life could be finished on earth. I hope you wouldn't regard such an eventuality as deliverance from a too long homily.

I could go on, but I think I have made the point.

How do we interpret the present time and what do we do about it? Luke had Jesus posit this question 1900 plus years ago. Have we got any better answers? Or are we paralyzed with the sheer weight of the problems and the speed with which they have grown to upend a world that we thought until very recently was getting better. I, for one, could not have imagined preaching such a homily like this even five years ago.

When I took a preaching course a very long time ago, it was stressed that one mustn't forget the Good News. Well believe it or not, I do think there is good news. To catch a glimpse of it let us go back to our passage from The Letter to the Hebrews: Remember the portion I read earlier that began with *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us....* And particularly the way it ends. *Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.* Pause – So that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

I promise that sometime I will preach a homily that doesn't mention the Shema, but it is difficult because it is the solution to every problem of our collective lives. If we were to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds, and with all our strength; if we were to love our neighbours as ourselves; and here

I add an additional provision, if we were to realize that there is not a single soul on this planet who is not our neighbour, the Bureau of Atomic Scientists could turn their clock back, and we would all be happier and healthier. We were not placed on this earth to be solitary individuals. We were placed here to be in God's community one with another here on earth. If we believed it, if we acted upon it and if we did not grow weary and lose heart, we would interpret the present time very differently. And we and all our fellow humans would not fall short. God will help. We simply have to genuinely ask. St. Augustine famously said in his Confessions, *Make me good, but not yet.* 89 seconds is not a lot of time for "Yet". Amen