

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Today’s gospel reading we can describe as one of the ‘hard’ sayings of Jesus. It’s one of those that we might skip over, and instead focus on the other, more positive messages. How can Jesus say, “I bring fire to the earth” and “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” It’s a lot different from the Old Testament reading we always have at Christmas, “And he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

There are, in fact, many ‘hard’ passages in the Bible, such as Jesus saying, “I wish that you were hot or cold, but because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth!” Or “If you want to be my disciple, whoever has two coats must give one to the person who has none, and the same with food.” It seems that today’s hard words are the harshest.

So why did Jesus say these hard words and what did he mean?

First Jesus talks about bringing fire to the earth. In the Bible ‘fire’ can be a metaphor for purification. Recall John the Baptist promising that Jesus “will baptise you in the Holy Spirit and fire.” And ‘fire’ can mean judgement. Elijah brought the fire of judgement on the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:36-40), and the soldiers of King Ahaziah (2 Kings 1:10-14). Interpreted like this, we can almost hear the exasperation of Jesus, that the world is still sinful and there is still much work to be done before the Kingdom can come in its fullness. Jesus says, “I wish (the purifying fire) was already kindled.”

Then in the next verse, Jesus seems to be longing for the closure of his death, and the stress he is under, until that terrible event is accomplished. He says, “But I have a baptism to be baptized with.” To understand this, we need to go back to Jesus’ response to James and John, who asked to sit at his right and left hand in the kingdom. Jesus said to them, “You don’t know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38). Here the cup and baptism are clear metaphors for Jesus’ suffering and death. A death that will bring redemption and new life for all believers.

Secondly, Jesus says, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” He goes on to say that households will be divided. Those are both very shocking things to say, especially to his Jewish followers. In Matthew’s gospel we hear even stronger language – Jesus brings a sword. In Israel, family relationships are all important. People know you from your family - they know who you are because they know your father and mother. That’s why all the genealogies in the Bible are so important. They might seem boring reading to us, but to the Jewish people it was very important that you knew to whom you were connected. The family and extended family provided a support system, so to divide a family is not only to deprive them of their connections, but it destroys the very basis of the social structure.

Why then would Jesus bring division?

Well, he had already been bringing division. In the time of Jesus, when Christianity was a radically new religion, people were despised for following him. If a Jew converted to Christianity, his family had a funeral for him, and he was disowned. If a person claimed to be a disciple of Jesus, they were considered the enemy, and a bounty was placed upon their head. The new Christian could have denied his faith and gone along with the majority. But in proclaiming their conviction of following Jesus the Christ, their past life, family and connections were forever erased. If one family member became a Christian, then a permanent division was created. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “there is a cost to discipleship.”

A similar situation may happen today. If you take your faith seriously, you will live by your convictions. Life would be easier if you just went with the flow, and adjusted your lifestyle to fit the circumstances. Then there would be peace in your family, or peace in your friendships, but inside you would be a mess, because you cannot serve two masters. If we try to live in two worlds, we will alternately hate one or despise the other. But if inner peace is at all important, then we must take the narrow road, the road where we listen to the still, quiet voice of Jesus, and follow it.

Third and finally, we come to the last part of today’s reading. Jesus says, “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” Again he sounds frustrated at his disciples’ lack of insight into what is happening. He remarks that they know well the signs of good and bad weather approaching, but they have not learned how to read signs of the *kairos*. There are two Greek words for time - *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* has to do with chronological time, clock time. *Kairos* has to do with special time; special moments in time - the forks in the road that make all the difference - moments with the potential to determine destinies. We might use the expression that we see the ‘signs of the times.’

Jesus is talking about the kind of time that is key to spiritual survival; the dawning of a new age that will follow his resurrection. The signs about which we are concerned today are mostly political or economic. What is happening in the world and in our country and town, and what effect will it have on us? We are much like the people to whom Jesus was speaking, because they too were interested in signs that would influence their own futures. And we are also like the people to whom Jesus was speaking in that, while we may be very interested in political and economic signs, we care little about the great spiritual issues of the day.

So, what is Jesus teaching us today?

He brings the purifying fire of baptism and judgement so that God can bring in the Kingdom in all its fullness.

Following Jesus is taking the narrow path that often causes division among people, because it’s seen as too difficult for many. It’s easier to follow the masses, but if we do, we’ll lose our integrity and our peace of mind.

Ignoring the signs of the times and not paying attention to the spiritual issues of today will lead to an increase in the chaos in the world.

Jesus wants us to follow him into that way of peace that he promised us. But Jesus tells us in a hard way how to get there. As Jesus said in John 14:27:

“²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

AMEN