

Fire and Division

Luke 12.49-59

Well, what sort of Gospel reading (good news reading) is this, with fire and division and judgment?

It is easy to lose ourselves in a single verse or a single passage, but every part of the Bible is related to the whole and every part of the good news of Jesus Christ is good news and is also a part of the whole Gospel (good news) that we know, in its 4 versions.

We need to look closely at the scripture and read deeply, knowing who Jesus is, what he taught, how he lived, and how he died and rose again. Whatever it says will not be inconsistent with that.

Let's start with fire. Fire is a powerful symbol in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus' listeners would be well aware of many of these fiery symbols.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus said, "I came to bring fire and how I wish it were already kindled."

What sort of fire might this be? We find many fiery references in the Bible that tell of God's power and presence. There are also references to the fire of God's judgement and purification.

We know the fire of the power and presence of God through the burning bush, the guiding pillar of fire at night, and the fire and smoke the people saw when the Lord descended on Mount Sinai. John the Baptist said, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Luke 3.16

We know, as Jesus' contemporary listeners did not, about the appearance of tongues of fire at Pentecost.

All of these passages speak of the fire of power and presence.

What of the fire of judgement and refining or purifying? Old Testament images include Genesis 19:24-25, when God rained down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, and in Numbers 16:35 fire consumed those who opposed God in the wilderness. From Lamentations 2:4b, "He has poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of Daughter Zion."

The prophet Malachi 3: 2-3 said, "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap." Fire and soap remind me of the washing day of previous generations. Who remembers that partnership of fire and soap? [...] The large copper had fire beneath and hot soapy water within, taking what was soiled and restoring it to snowy white cleanliness and purity.

There are also fiery reminders and warnings in the New Testament.

Two glimpses from Paul's letters: "Their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work." (1 Corinthians 3:13)

Similarly, 2 Thessalonians 1: 6-7 says, "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels."

From Luke's Gospel of the words of Jesus, "When the disciples James and John saw this [Samaritan lack of hospitality towards them because they were on the way to Jerusalem], they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them ?'" (Luke 9:54) Did Jesus say yes or no? [...]

"[Jesus] turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then they went on to another village." (Luke 9: 55-56)

Strong words, all of them, but in today's reading from Luke, Jesus simply said, "I came to bring fire and how I wish it were already kindled."

What could that mean? We will come back to that fire.

Let's look at division. The combinations of people that Jesus names are strange. He says that five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. This is group dynamics, not individuals. But then Jesus also names pairs of individuals. You will notice that every pair (father and son, mother and daughter, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law), every pair belonged to successive generations and in every case the second-named owed cultural and familial allegiance and obedience to the first-named.

In your childhood, apart from Jesus, whom were you taught to trust and obey? [...]

Jesus says that this bond will be broken. Families will not necessarily continue to be united as one, speaking with one voice and following the same decisions and actions. They will be divided. This is not the first time that Jesus has spoken like this.

Remember the man who felt unable to follow Jesus until he buried his father? This man was reluctant to break the lifelong expectation of obedience to his father, but said he would come after his father was dead and buried. Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their dead." (Matthew 8:22 and Luke 9:60) In other words, the man needed to break with that cultural and familial expectation to make the life-giving and life-changing choice to follow Jesus.

Similarly, at one time when Jesus was talking to a crowd, his earthly mother and brothers came to fetch him. He indicated the crowd of disciples he was addressing and replied, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in

heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:46-50) Jesus is not severing the bond of his earthly family. He remained close to them. However, he moved the boundaries. The family is more than a bloodline or a household. Just as an earthly family was expected to do the will of their father and the head of their household, so those who did the will of Jesus’ heavenly Father became a part of the family of God.

Jesus reinforces this message by warning about reading the signs of the time; he tells them not to rely on the judgment of others but to judge for themselves what is right. Rather than relying on those who expected to have authority over them, as followers of Jesus, they should make their own judgement about the right thing to do, in the light of that new relationship.

Let’s come back to “I came to bring fire and how I wish it were already kindled.” (For the grammar enthusiasts, don’t you love the use of the somewhat endangered subjunctive mood for the verb, expressing something imagined or wished for or possible!)

Do you remember Luke 24:32a on the road to Emmaus, “They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’“

The fire of Pentecost comes only after the crucifixion and resurrection. The power of the Holy Spirit purifies and re-shapes hearts and minds and lives. All that is not holy is illuminated, purified and made holy.

The candles in our church remind us of the light of Christ, and all these other fiery images of the power and presence of God in our lives, lighting the way that we should follow. You can light a candle later in the service if you wish, or at any time really.

James Laurence is a pastor of the First Lutheran Church of Albemarle, North Carolina. He summarises it like this.

It is a fire that starts in baptism. It is a fire that is rekindled whenever we gather with other Christians. And it is a fire that we want to spread. We want this fire to blaze beyond these walls. We want it to break through the firewalls in our lives and in this world. We want it to burn out of control until every heart feels its flame. And until the very face of the earth is renewed. May the fire that Jesus came to bring always burn within the hearts of us all. To the glory of God. Amen.

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