

Trinity 9 2019

Jeremiah 23.23-29.

Hebrews 11.29-12.3.

Luke 12.49-56.

When I was a child, I was very frightened of my prep school headmaster. I am sure that he was a kind man, but I never remember him smiling, and on the odd occasion when he called me into his study because I had misbehaved in some way, I was simply terrified. Such was a certain type of school life fifty years ago!

When I hear again the description of Jesus' anger and harsh words in this morning's Gospel passage, I think of the hard rebukes I would receive from time to time in those far off schooldays.

Now, already, the psychologists and therapists amongst you will be turning your minds to Jung or Freud or someone else's theory to explain why I am thinking of Jesus in the same breath as my old headmaster. I am quite happy to explain my hang-ups and neuroses over coffee after the Eucharist. Just form an orderly queue!

Seriously, though, we might justifiably ask: is Jesus going back on some of his earlier teaching here? ***"I have come to bring fire to the earth...Do you think I have come peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"*** What's happened to ***"peace on earth"*** and all that? Why is the good shepherd suddenly sounding so bad-tempered?

Well, to go back to basics just for a moment, the first thing that we need to remember is that, unlike a Letter of St Paul, a Gospel does not deal with the immediate problems or challenge of one church, in one place at one time:

Corinth, Ephesus or wherever. The purpose and effect of a Gospel is broader and is to mould the character of a community for the long haul.

And so, here we have Luke writing some years after the resurrection, aware that the expected second coming hasn't yet happened and trying to do just that. He is moulding his community by reminding it of the continuing urgency of the times, despite the apparent delay, and the fact that Jesus' mission, which they are continuing, will even cause division. Of course, the fact remains that faith can lead to unpopularity, division or persecution, even now.

Jesus is expressing the tension that he feels, because his task is not yet complete. His frustration gives the narrative a new sense of him straining ahead to what awaits him in Jerusalem and in letting off steam, we see his true humanity. *"I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!"* he says. Here *"fire"* doesn't mean burning things down. In biblical language it means purifying God's people. Jesus longs to see his job of purifying them complete and he makes his point with this very strong language, so that the disciples may face the difficulties that lie ahead (including divisions) and make their decision whether or not they actually want to follow him.

Of course, all this resonates with both of our other readings. Jeremiah is frustrated by the false prophets who get in the way and clog up the true word of God and cause deviations from the covenant God has made with them. And then the author of the Letter to the Hebrews takes us through a list of past Old Testament heroes of the faith who have endured enormous suffering but now, as he says, have been provided by God with *"something better"*: In other words, they too can possess fully what Christians in the

present now have, because of their endurance and witness in the far distant past.

So, Jesus has come to bring peace, but the immediate reality is division caused by Jesus' mission: division which, of course, led him to the cross.

As I said earlier, faith can still cause division and lead to unpopularity and even persecution. In some parts of the world this is truly terrible. It is estimated that there are around two hundred and fifteen million Christians in the world today who experience what is defined as high, very high or extreme levels of persecution. One in twelve Christians in the world today live in areas where Christianity is illegal, forbidden or punished. There is still, surely, a contemporary call to respond to the urgency of our own times.

Here in Chichester, the persecution of the Church may seem a long way away and we live and worship in freedom. And yet, I do think that in the West there are far more subtle forms of persecution, which we might hardly notice, one of which is sheer indifference harnessed to a kind of subtle suppression.

By indifference, I don't mean just natural ignorance. The young lady who used to cut my hair once exclaimed in amazement: "*You mean... you have to work on Christmas Day!*" In fact, in those days my visits to her salon became almost like R.E. lessons. We had a deal. I would explain to her – for example – what Lent or Advent were all about and in return she would explain the benefits of conditioner or some other wonder of hairdressing! It was a good relationship and I was delighted and moved to learn that she was married in church last summer.

But a real form of persecution is that indifference and suppression, which manifests itself with – for example – the decline of religious broadcasting or dropping the title Maundy Thursday in the media. There is a school in East Sussex which used to call itself St Bede’s. It now calls itself “*Bede’s*” because it was felt that prospective parents might be put off by the religious connotations in the previous name. I have noticed, that, sadly, my own school has all but wiped out any mention of its very definite Christian foundation from its website and prospectus, for what would appear to be the same reason.

All of this might be seen harmless, but the fact remains that it all represents a steady “*drip, drip drip*” of collusion with the increasingly secular society in which we live.

I do not believe that our job is to stand on the high street shouting out biblical passages and warning people about hell, that we see some do from time to time. Most people who act in that way in the twenty first century are more than likely to be seen as cranks. But one has to admire their courage and their conviction.

Do we have courage and conviction... to find ways of challenging such much of the “*drip, drip drip*” ?

There is a general opinion, shared by believers and unbelievers alike, that Christians should be “*nice*” people, not rocking the boat, not upsetting anyone. But Christianity is not a question of human fellowship ... at all costs. After all, Jesus was not always “*nice*”. He was tender, accepting and pardoning, as we must be. But he could also be challenging and disturbing

and there will be moments in life when, in his name, we must be too, saying uncomfortable things to stand out against what is wrong.

I believe that the courage and conviction to do this starts with ordering our lives under the rule of God. Allowing ourselves to be moulded, as the Gospel writers were trying to do with their communities: ensuring that our lives are marked not with pettiness, arguments and competition, but instead by the kind of love, compassion and holiness through which we come to live distinctive...and *provocative* lives.