

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	17 August 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Ninth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

As a child I went to a small prep school for girls, which was run by a deeply Christian Head Mistress. I recall a gentle and kind place, while lessons in those days seemed relaxed – or, at least, that’s how I remember them. In the classrooms there were old-fashioned pictures of Jesus– mostly by Margaret Tarrant – one of Jesus feeding birds with wild animals at his feet, another of Jesus as the loving shepherd, surrounded by sheep and children. I loved those pictures, and I still do – but I recognise now that the pale -faced Jesus, always dressed in a white robe, is far from the Jesus of the Gospels. That Jesus is altogether a tougher, stronger and more solid character. At the moment the lectionary readings are taken from Luke’s Gospel, and we tend to associate Luke’s Gospel with Jesus’ gentle, best loved parables, but this week’s verses are in a different key – they are positively difficult. So much so, I was tempted to preach from the Epistle! But I am firmly wedded to the principle that the difficult passages of Scripture are not to be glossed over but wrestled with until they yield their wisdom. So here goes.

The problem. What are we to make of Jesus’ words? ‘49 I came to bring fire to the earth’ and ‘51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!’ This seems so completely at odds with the promises we read elsewhere in Scripture, where Jesus is depicted as, ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ They sound strange and contradictory.

Explanation To begin with the language of v 49, ‘I am come to bring fire to the earth’ is not unknown in Luke’s Gospel as it contains echoes of John the Baptist speaking about Jesus, in Luke 3:16-17. Back at the beginning of the Gospel John talked of Jesus, the coming Messiah as one who would ‘baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ and then goes on to talk about the division and separation that Jesus would precipitate, ‘His winnowing fork is in his hand...to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’ This is

not 'gentle Jesus meek and mild.' The idea that Jesus' would cause division, force people to take sides, whether because of his message, his actions or his claim to be the Messiah, runs through all the Gospels.

But when he says, v53 ' 53 they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother,' Jesus is quoting the prophet Micah 7:6. If you read Micah 7, the prophet is foretelling coming judgement on Israel, because of the way in which the people had turned their back on God, so that corruption, exploitation and injustice was rife; there was a deep lack of respect for others, so that ' the son treats the father with contempt; the daughter rises up against her mother..'

So Jesus is likening Palestine of his day to Israel in the time of Micah and foreseeing coming crises. He castigates those listening for being able to tell the weather forecast by reading the signs in the sky but not being able to 'interpret the present time'; the signs around them.

What crises did Jesus see approaching? There were two I think. **First there was the political crisis;** caused by the toxic mix of Herod's regime which caused resentment among the Jews; conflict between the main religion parties and a people eager for violent uprising against the occupying Romans. It came to a head in AD 70 when the Romans had had enough and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and the country. Jesus lived in turbulent political times and could read the signs of the times and he was urging them to sort it out while there was time.

But second there was the individual spiritual crisis that people would face. What would they do with this man called Jesus who claimed he was the Son of God? What would people make of his death as a common criminal and the claim of his disciples that he had risen from the death? Jesus knew his teaching and his claims would be divisive. While the first political crisis referred to by Jesus has past, the capacity for the Gospel to cause spiritual division remains real. Christians can often find themselves on the receiving end of withering scorn. Although it's an old example, I was reading only the other week of the way in which the Bloomsbury group regarded TS Eliot as dead to them, once he became a Christian. He found himself despised by one of the dominant intellectual groups of the time.

But the Christian Church has always taken these verses to mean that people in the Church should be able to read the signs of the time – to engage and understand political and social currents around them and seek to interpret

them through the lens of the Kingdom of God – the prophetic role of the church. That takes sensitivity, a willingness to engage both with the secular world and the spiritual and may not make you popular. It also takes time and we need resources to help us.

I've recently discovered a Christian blog <https://www.seenandunseen.com/> set up by the thoughtful Bishop Graham Tomlin, who until a few years ago was Bishop of Kensington. I can recommend it as a site where someone seeks to bring his Christian faith, theological and philosophical understanding to bear on issues of the day.

On Friday evening, after the service here, Bishop Martin was talking about what it was like to be in the House of Lords, taking part in the debate surrounding the Assisted Dying Bill - a complex and emotional topic – where traditional Christian teaching was, on occasions he thought, both being misrepresented and attacked. It takes courage to speak out against a tide of popular opinion.

If we want our Christian leaders to be able to be able to speak out, to defend the values of the Kingdom of God; those values that we reiterate every time we say or listen to the Magnificat at Evensong, they need our support, our prayers. **For us**, one of the signs of the times is an increasingly polarised world. We need to ensure that we engage courteously and respectfully with other people with whom we disagree – difficult when we feel passionately about something. But it is an essential to show that we believe that every individual is made in the image of God and should be treated with respect.

Conclusion Jesus lived in turbulent political times as do we. His message of the Kingdom of God can be divisive and demanding as it turns many of the world's values on their heads. But when Micah looked at the world around him, as well as seeing approaching problems he also had hope ; ' I will wait for the God of my salvation;... do not rejoice over me. O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness the Lord will be a light to me.' The Letter to the Hebrews we have just heard lists the sufferings of many of the saints of God in the Old Testament – they looked ahead with hope, for the 'city that has foundations, whose maker and builder is God'. They surround us now as we 'run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.'