

Trinity 12 (2013)

Luke 12

New International Version (NIV)

⁴⁹ “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

⁵⁴ He said to the crowd: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. ⁵⁵ And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is.

⁵⁶ Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?”

At our first church, where Joan and I married
Our vicar, Rev Michael Ware,
used to preach a lot of pulpit-thumping sermons
warning us of the day of judgment

I remember sitting in the choir stalls one Sunday
next to Don the Thurifer
(that's the guy who makes all the holy smoke)

When Fr Michael reminded us for the 1000th time
that we're all sinners
Don muttered, not very subtly "You speak for yourself mate!"

To be honest, I never had a problem with the concept
That when compared with the glory, the splendour,
the perfection of our almighty creator – we are *all* sinners
miserable sinners in fact

another thing Fr Michael was always bending our ears about
was the way so many Christians
pick and choose their favourite readings
and leave the more difficult words of Jesus alone

this morning Fr Michael would be in his element
for in the difficult words of Jesus stakes
verses 51-53 are surely front-runners

⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there
will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.

⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and
daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against
mother-in-law."

Yeah – nice!

Makes you glad you came to church this morning doesn't it?

This is one of those tough and bitter pills
Fr Michael insisted we can't ignore
This is medicine we *must* swallow
But as nurse used to say - "It's for your own good dear!"

Fr Michael was quite right, we mustn't ignore certain scriptures
Just because they're not to our liking
But here – I need to come clean
Caroline and Alison tried very hard to get me to New Wine last week

to be fair – I had a very busy week,
with a day in Wells and a Wedding Anniversary

I had a bit of juggling to do between work and family

(and as dear Bishop Jim warned us the night before my ordination
“If you can’t be priest to your own family
Don’t you dare think you can pastor a parish!”)

So - I didn’t get to New Wine - but that’s not the whole story
New Wine – like Spring Harvest – is part of the Evangelical Alliance
And whilst I went to an evangelical college
I have to admit - some of the speakers at these things
Make me feel just a little uneasy

They’re sometimes too black and white for me
They leave absolutely no room for manoeuvre

And it makes me wonder how evangelical am I?
Do I believe this is God’s word? Absolutely
But just how absolute is God’s word?
And how much allowances should we make
For God’s *grace* to do it’s magic?

I believe my God is bigger than any doctrine
Or law or decree of mankind
His heart is ten thousand times bigger than our bigotry

this morning’s gospel reading is a good example

There’s a strong swell of opinion among some evangelicals
(and I think Fr Michael would be one of them)
That the reason congregations are dwindling these days
Is because Christianity is no longer seen as a serious religion

And *that* - they claim - is down to benign “Jesus loves you” preachers
Who shower their listeners with platitudes
And avoid the awkward, more challenging questions

Some will tell you, that Islam is the world’s fastest growing religion
Because it has more meat, more substance
It doesn’t dole out quick, trite answers
And duck the serious issues we all face today

whilst obviously condemning the evil of Al Qaeda & the Taliban
One does have to ask – do our critics have a point?

how many people compare the passion,
the life or death urgency of *their* convictions
with the wishy-washy, happy-clappy brigade?

The writer to the Hebrews urges his readers in their faith and sites the struggles of their forefathers...

tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ *Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.* ³⁷ *They were put to death by stoning; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—* ³⁸ *the world was not worthy of them.*

what measure of faith do we show by just coming to church?

Would we – when push came to shove
be prepared to go against the family flow?
do we value belonging to our earthly family
More than the treasure that awaits us at our final destination?

This is essentially what Jesus is saying in this gospel reading
So let's take a little closer look

First of all – I think it's important to remind you
That Jesus wasn't Church of England!
He wasn't Roman Catholic either,
Jesus was a Jew, and He was speaking to a Jewish audience here

Jews believed God would judge the rest of us by another standard,
We Gentiles, living outside of the Law of Moses were all heathen
We wouldn't get a look in
but as God's chosen race, Jews believed they were already saved

so this must have come as an even tougher message to His listeners than it is for us today!

But it shouldn't have come as such a nasty shock
And this is the point Jesus was making to them

They had their history books and their prophets
What we now call the Old Testament
To warn them of the coming Messiah
To warn them of the day of judgement

And yet – Jesus points out in verse 56
they still had a better eye on the weather
Than they did on the coming King

⁵⁶ *Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?*

Now I've said this before
it's all very well to laugh at their ignorance
but they have an excuse – we don't

they didn't see the whole story
the cross, the death, the resurrection

they didn't know about Paul yet
who used his vast knowledge of Jewish law and history
to prove convincingly that Jesus died for us *all*

Jesus' audience didn't have the benefit of hindsight
when it comes to our turn on judgement day
we won't have a leg to stand on!

Good here isn't it?
First we celebrate it's not *us* Jesus is having a go at
Then we realise it soon will be!

when I was quite small
My brother and I got into trouble for something or other
And I laughed as he got the slipper
Then I burst into tears as I realised
"I don't know why I'm laughing – it's my turn next!"

Apparently dad dissolved and just couldn't do it
(my brother never forgave me for that one)

Will our heavenly Father have the same mercy?
Or is the evidence before us so compelling
That we ignore it at our peril?

How many times have you judged the Jews of Jesus' day?
How often have you joined in
Or at best failed to challenge the accusations
That the Jews crucified The Messiah?

How often have you read this – or another passage
Where they failed to recognise or accept Jesus
And laughed at their ignorance?

When we ignore some passages because they're too hard
We risk becoming as blinkered as these Jews

So here's the passage translated thus far
Don't treat God like the weather
Don't think you can check the forecast the night before
and then forget about it

the forecast is in here (bible) and there's a storm coming
nobody knows where or when
but we'd better be ready when it comes

as Billy Connolly says
“there’s no such thing as bad weather, just wrong clothing!”
Make sure you’re ready for it

However – as usual - I leave the good news to the end...
See how good I am to you?
I make sure you take the medicine,
But I always give you the sweetie afterwards!

Jesus is clearly frustrated to the point of anger
⁴⁹ “I have come to bring fire on the earth,
and how I wish it were already kindled!”

there’s a statement – right there
that should make the happy-clappies stop in their tracks
and wonder if they’ve reduced The Almighty to the “all matey”

but at the same time, isn’t this a line for Moslems to ponder
when they demote Jesus to being just a prophet?
A prophet might say
“he will come to bring fire on the earth”
But not “I have come “

Anyway – back to the point - the beauty of Jesus
is that He’s never too angry to carry His mission through
and here, despite His frustration with them
it doesn’t stop Him from explaining that mission to them

⁵⁰ *But I have a baptism to undergo,
and what constraint I am under until it is completed!*

Let’s take break sentence into two halves
Jesus had of course, already been baptised by John
So we know He’s not referring to that

The baptism He has in mind
is more what we might call “a baptism of fire”

The word “baptism” means submersion
So for “baptism” in this context
We should read “sunk” “lost without trace”, “blown away”.
There may be a storm ahead
But it’s going to be a lot worse for Jesus
Something terrible lay ahead – and Jesus knew full well what it was

It’s an oft debated question,
as to just how much choice Jesus had regarding His crucifixion

some say He was destined for the cross from birth
others see the emotional agony of Gethsemane
as evidence He was pleading to the Father right to the last
“yet not my will Lord – but Yours”

but it's clear from His words here
that the cross was always on His mind

and yet - despite their ignorance
despite their reluctance to accept Him as their Messiah
and despite His obvious anger and frustration with them
Jesus is still ready to teach, to instruct and to assure them

Particularly in the second half of verse 50
⁵⁰ *But I have a baptism to undergo -
and what constraint I am under until it is completed!*

There's a whole sermon in this one throw-away line

Up to now, Jesus has demonstrated *awesome* power
Healing the sick, driving out demons, calming storms
And yet here He says
“what constraint I am under”

Boy - just imagine what He could do without constraint!
What does Jesus mean when He says this?

Well, we know of course
that the Holy Spirit is still waiting in the wings at this point
But that's for our sake – not for His

Jesus said, *“unless I go, the comforter cannot come to you”*
And we all know what happened as soon as He arrived
Tongues of fire and a church is born

But I don't think this is the “constraint” Jesus means
This is slightly dodgy ground
so I'll just suggest it rather than make it a statement
but could it be that Jesus is constrained by *our* lack of faith?

We all know how impressed Jesus was
by the Roman centurion's faith
And how He consequently healed his servant
without even going to His home

we all know how the Canaanite woman impressed Him
and how her daughter was delivered from demons instantly

in 1 Corinthians 2 Paul says

“I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

Our faith is like a tap, we can turn on the power of God

So surely that works in reverse too

And our lack of faith can frustrate and constrain Him?

Yes – this is a tough passage to take on board

That keeping our faith might cost us the love of family members

Yes – it’s tough that some friends may think us a bit weird

But if you’re prepared to show Jesus just how much you love Him

And how much faith you have in Him – and be ready to be amazed

Perhaps the best demonstration of faith

Is to pray for your family and friends

Then they can be amazed too!

I leave the last word this morning, to the writer of Hebrews

(Heb 12:1-2)