

The gospel is urgent... (sermon on Luke 12.49-56 by Teresa Morgan)

This week, I spent several days trying to think of a way not to preach on today's gospel. Because it's one of those passages many of us prefer to gloss over when we're thinking about Jesus. Jesus has just been attacking the Pharisees, and now he turns on all the people who have come to hear him. He calls them hypocrites who don't understand the time they're living in, and threatens to bring fire to the earth and conflict to humanity.

It's very much at odds with the picture most of us prefer, of Jesus as a man of peace, preaching and practising love and forgiveness. But after several days of evading it, I decided that I ought to face this text. So what can we say about it?

Part of Jesus's mission and his gift is to look deeply into people's hearts. What he sees there sometimes dismays him. And he is driven by this tremendous sense of urgency: the Kingdom of God is at hand. You must repent – now – there isn't much time. So when he's talking to people he thinks are ignoring or flouting the Word of God, he believes he is helping them by not pulling any punches.

Jesus's teaching about how people should keep the Word of God is very radical. Love your enemies. Don't worry about your life. Give all you have to the poor. These are difficult things really to hear, let alone to understand, let alone to do. It's not enough for Jesus that people listen, and nod their heads and say his ideas are very beautiful, and then go home and don't put them into practice. He wants them to try – really to try – to love God with all their heart and all their soul and all their mind and all the strength, and their neighbour as a second self. He has to strip away people's complacency, get past the cosy level of easy agreement, and plunge his message deep into their hearts. To do that, sometimes he has to frighten them out of their skin.

And when he says that his teachings will divide father from son and mother from daughter, he is only telling the truth. The gospel is a challenging path, and people who aren't following it won't understand, and may feel you've abandoned them, or you're no fun any more, and try to make you go back to what you were before. When you chose a difficult road in this life, there will always be people who will use every weapon, every kind of peer pressure, to try to get you to abandon it. Jesus's words in today's gospel are a serious warning, that if you opt to follow him, you may well face hostility and misunderstanding, and you need to be prepared for it.

Taking all that into account, we may still feel that the Jesus we see in this passage is very unlike the Jesus who drew people to him by his radiant gentleness and compassion. I think Luke feels it too. This passage is part of a rather loose collection of teachings in the middle of the gospel, which Luke inherited from an earlier source, and which in some ways is rather different from Luke's picture of Jesus at the beginning and end of the gospel. Luke own view of Christ is very much that of the Son of God: always calm, always in control, always loving and forgiving. Even on the cross: it's in Luke's gospel that Jesus says, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

Whereas in the section we heard part of today, Jesus is much more like an Old Testament prophet – a man, fired by divine inspiration, standing on the edges of society and criticizing it.

We have a number of different traditions about Jesus in the gospels. It would be wrong, though, to regard any one of them as more authentic than another. It's more likely that all of them reflect different ways that people saw Jesus from the earliest days. And when we think about our own lives, that isn't really surprising. We all look slightly different to our parents and our grandchildren, to family and friends and colleagues at work. How you see someone depends on where you're standing, and that's as true of Jesus as anyone else.

People see what they expect to see, or want, or need to see. The Romans were interested in law and order, so if someone was speaking out, they saw him as a criminal and executed him. The Pharisees were interested in God's Law, so if someone was speaking out they saw him as a blasphemer. People who needed healing saw Jesus as a healer; those who wanted teaching saw him as a teacher; those who were waiting for the Messiah saw him as the Messiah. They were all right. Jesus has many aspects, and often he comes to meet us in whichever form we need most.

But we also know that sometimes we can surprise people, and change their view of us – and sometimes that happens accidentally, but sometimes we choose to do it. Jesus sometimes surprises people who meet him, because what they want to see in him isn't what they need to see. Like when the disciples try to keep a group of children from bothering the great man, but Jesus says, Let them come to me. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. Or when Jesus heals the slave of the Roman centurion – the hated foreign oppressor – and tells his disciples, 'I have not found such great faith anywhere in Israel.'

We too sometimes meet in the gospels a Jesus we didn't expect to meet and may not think we want to meet. But when we encounter passages like this, we have to ask ourselves, what are they teaching us, that we didn't want to hear? What is it about Jesus in this passage that it's important for us to understand?

That's a question we each answer for ourselves. For me, this week, this passage reminded me that the gospel is urgent. 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it was already kindled!' God can't wait till I have a bit of free time to think about Him. I need to think about Him now! It reminded me that following God has consequences, which can be painful. 'Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, but rather division!' We need to be prepared for that, and to hold fast to our faith while still living with and loving the people who dislike it. Last of all, this passage reminds me that everything we do for God, Jesus has already done. Every step of the road of faith we walk, he has already walked. And as we take his way of insight and compassion, of challenge and hope and forgiveness, he is walking it again, with us.

Amen