



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Ninth Sunday after Trinity Proper 15 Year C

Luke 12.49-56

Hebrews 11.29-12.2

These readings are not the most well known in the New Testament, maybe I should add not the most popular either. It's perhaps a way into them and to keep that in mind. What do you think of when you think of Jesus's teaching? I don't expect that this passage would be the first to come to mind. Think of the beautiful prophecy of Isaiah from chapter nine, so often read at carol services:

<sup>6</sup> 'For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'

Certainly all this is true but Jesus is not 'meek and mild,' and here he is anything but the 'Prince of peace.' What Jesus is doing is trying to jolt the Jews out of their complacency and confront them with the truth. Jesus is the embodiment of truth and truth is not always popular, people so often want the truth to equal what they want. Pilate, cynical, used to lies, politics, brutal abuse of power and expediency could not even see what truth was any longer or didn't want to!

<sup>37</sup> 'Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' <sup>38</sup> Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?' (John 18)

Here Jesus puts truth at the centre. Jesus brings the good news of the kingdom of God, he will die at Calvary to set us free and restore the fractured relationship with God. We are once more his beloved children. Jesus at his resurrection will triumph over death. He ushers in the newly created order.

All this is the truth of the good news Jesus brings. He is the fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures and the prophets who foretold him; prophets like Isaiah who knew the Messiah would come to rule.

<sup>31</sup> 'Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' (John 8)

It is this message of freedom that Jesus brings. However it is not popular, so many of the Jews simply won't accept him. They prefer to cling to the old ways, to think if they obey the law they have got it right with God. Here Jesus stands before them, Messiah and God but they are blind to his teaching.

There are those however who do accept him, who will turn to him and follow with all their hearts. Once again the opening paragraph of John's gospel sums this up exactly.

<sup>10</sup> 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

So Jesus stands before the crowd and he tells the truth. Time is short,

<sup>49</sup> 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup>I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!'

Jesus stands up for truth but there is so much evil and evil is opposed to goodness and truth. His message is divisive, hard hitting, people must choose, will they carry on in their cosy misguided world or turn to him. Sadly so many will oppose him, families will be torn apart, that is not true just of the Jews he was addressing but it echoes down through history to the present time.

These words are spoken before Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem. The 'baptism' he refers to is his suffering on the cross at Calvary. There, goodness and love will fight a battle with the powers of evil, a battle which Jesus will win.

Evil is still in the world but ultimately goodness will always triumph. Now Jesus stands before the crowd and tells them the message, the life of a Christian will never be easy. There will be opposition, persecution and maybe even death because what Jesus says will be divisive. Those who oppose him and his way will hate those who follow him and seek to impose their will upon them, seeking to prevent them from following the faith.

<sup>54</sup> 'He also said to the crowds, 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. <sup>55</sup>And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens. <sup>56</sup> You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?'

Here they live in an occupied country with a corrupt king and ruling classes that oppress them. Well says Jesus, you can read the weather signs but you can't see the wood from the trees in the world you live in. You pray for the coming of the Messiah, you slavishly obey the law. But you can't see the Messiah when he stands before you. You can't see that I have superseded the law; you can't see that God will bring in a newly created order of justice and peace which begins with me. They are blind and ruled by 'blind guides' who 'lead them into the ditch.' What's more they are stiff necked refusing to see the truth and that is where the division is. Those who do see will follow and those who don't will always turn their backs.

This is not part of our reading but it is very important,

<sup>57</sup> 'And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? <sup>58</sup>Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the

judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. <sup>59</sup>I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.'

This is not literal; it is an illustration, a metaphor for what will happen if they do not listen to him. The way of goodness, peace and love is the way forward. They must put God at the centre of their lives and accept that Jesus has brought the new way. If they don't, if they follow their own rebellious ways, they will rise up hopelessly against Roman rule and the result will be utter disaster. Thousands will be killed, Jerusalem will be desolated and the Temple razed to the ground never to be restored. They must turn from sin and turn to Christ if disaster is to be averted. They need to open their eyes and follow Jesus. Sadly so few did.

Jesus goes on his way to Calvary knowing all this; he is fulfilling God's purpose in love. His followers, as Jesus knows, are human and fallible; they are scattered but they will regroup and upon them will fall the task of building on the foundations he laid.

In every generation the message of Jesus is divisive because it is radical, revolutionary. It turns the world's accepted values on their head and demands self-giving love not self-seeking gain. The message of Jesus issues a challenge to all of us, 'Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?'

We may not have to face death or persecution, though many do in other countries, but we are called to stand up for Jesus. Standing up for Jesus means standing firm for the truth and his way, and that is not always popular. It is easier to go with the crowd, to turn a blind eye to what we know in our hearts to be wrong. That won't do, says Jesus. My truth is absolute; it is divisive because it is counter cultural. There will always be opposition from those who prefer to follow their own way and the accepted, maybe corrupt ways of the world. But truth is clear; it is the way of Jesus, the way of God. Being a Christian is tough, Jesus states here that it will be, but there are no half and halves with him. To water Christianity down to suit ourselves means it is not Christianity any longer. Stand firm for the truth, 'for the truth will set you free.' Jesus' message of caring for one another and not putting self-first is central to his teaching. He walked with humanity here and we are called to follow the example he gave us.

Our gospel points at so many who refused to follow God's way, to the division that would come between those who followed the faith and those who did not. The epistle to the Hebrews looks at those who were steadfast in their faith in God before the coming of Jesus, God's long awaited Messiah. The writer calls these people, 'so great a cloud of witnesses.'

If we think of our own lives for a moment, if we take time to pause and look back, who would we name as the persons of faith in our own life journey? Who for us are the 'great cloud of witnesses' to Jesus Christ who have gone before and by their lives and example have helped to shape our faith? The writer of Hebrews looks back to the very founding father of the race, Abraham. We saw last week how he illustrated Abraham's absolute faith in God. Just prior to today's passage he shows how Abraham faced the ultimate test. The child of God, Isaac was demanded as a sacrifice. He was willing to meet that awful challenge. God stayed his hand and restored the child but he had passed the test.

So the writer goes on, tracing men and women of faith throughout the long history of Israel. At the beginning of the Exodus men of faith led the people in God's way as he rescued them from slavery

and guided them to the Promised Land. He outlines the great acts of God and the faith the leaders and sometimes very ordinary people put in him.

<sup>29</sup> 'By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. <sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.'

So he goes on to list the great leaders,

<sup>32</sup> 'And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— <sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.'

Some are named, others we can recognise like Daniel and the three men in the fiery furnace. He goes on to delineate those others, unnamed yet heroes and heroines who suffered for the faith but remained true to the end. Why did they suffer? Because as Jesus was to point out in the gospel, those who follow the truth, those who stand up for right, for God's truth, are often opposed to the ways of the world. The world turns on them; evil rife as ever persecutes them. But they are standing up for right, for goodness, for the values of God. Ultimately these values will be restored to the earth.

All these died and none of them saw the Messiah, the fulfilment of the scriptures. These are the ancestors of faith of whom they must be proud. Of course the Hebrews he is addressing are the children of Abraham but they are also newly born children of God in Jesus Christ.

<sup>39</sup> 'Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.' His audience is alive after the coming of Jesus Christ. They have been baptised and have turned to him. They will receive the full promises of God. Jesus Christ lived and died for humanity he conquered evil through love. The relationship of love with God has been restored, they are children of their Father and co-heirs with Christ. Their sins have been forgiven and they are setting out on a faith journey with Christ.

Now then,

<sup>12.1</sup> 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.'

Firstly let's go back to his audience, the new Christians he is addressing; it was written for Christians living in and around Jerusalem. It is important to understand that it was written for a community of Christians suffering from persecution. We remember that James the just, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem was martyred around AD 62. So then this links into what he has said. When you face persecution, look back to the steadfastness of the men and women of faith throughout your history. These men and women held fast to God even in the face of intolerable suffering. You may have to face this too but hold fast to Jesus Christ. Remember too that Jesus Christ walked the way of pain and death before you, that he set the example, so

'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.’

but that was not the end because on that first Easter morning Jesus was raised from the dead, God has exalted him and you too will have God’s love and reward. Always look to Jesus as your pattern because he has walked the way before you.

All this applies to every Christian in every age. There is nothing that humanity experiences that Jesus has not, he is the God who came to be with us, who walked with us, who shared our sufferings and knew our joys. Indeed God is still with us in the form of his Holy Spirit, close as our own breathing. Of course we will face opposition. Christianity is countercultural, evil is still present, we see it on our news every day. The point is we must stand up for truth, for the values of goodness and for the teachings of Jesus Christ however uncomfortable that may be.

We may not have to face awful persecution but Christianity is as divisive now as Jesus said it would be. Those who want their own power who will put others down on a huge scale or small are working against Jesus. Every Christian must work in love and stand up for what is right, for the truth. He has shown us the way and the Holy Spirit will be our strength and our guide throughout our lives. When times are tough Jesus walks alongside. We are never alone.

*‘Stand up stand up for Jesus, in faith and hope be strong, stand firm for right and justice opposed to sin and wrong. Give comfort to the wounded and care for those in pain.’*     Jean Holloway.

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