

Ordinary Sunday 20 - 15 August

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 8:1-2, 8-19; Heb 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-59

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

All of us would like to believe the myth of painless Christianity. We would like to believe that the presence of Jesus in our lives will solve all our problems, smooth out all the rough places, and create a tranquil, peaceful existence. After all, doesn't the coming of Jesus promise, as the angels sang at his birth "peace on earth?"

The jarring words of today's gospel reading come as a surprise. They disturb this image of the Prince of Peace and threaten our myth of a painless Christianity. Because in these words, Luke reminds us that peace comes through a re-ordering of relationships and loyalties.

For while the coming of Jesus among us does bring peace with God and with our fellow men and women, it also threatens the status quo and we are faced with an absolute choice.

Jesus says that he longs to bring fire.— Fire is the symbol of God's activity in judgement and purification.

Jesus understands that the purpose of his ministry—the purpose of his life— is to create a crisis on earth. Through his death — what he here describes as the baptism with which he is to be baptised — God will confront humanity with the moment of truth— the long-awaited "day of the Lord" will be initiated.

Through the fiery presence of the Spirit, God will convict people of sin, judge between those who repent and those who do not, and purge the disciples of their sinful dross.

Jesus' words here are an anticipation of Gethsemene— an indication that the passion begins even in the midst of Jesus' active ministry.

Jesus knew that he must suffer before God's kingdom could come. It could even be said that Jesus interpreted his suffering, death and resurrection as active elements in his messianic vocation.

He spoke of his passion as somehow a task laid upon him which it was his mission to accomplish for humanity.

And so he says here “I have a baptism to be baptised with and what stress I am under until it is completed”.

There is in these words a note of urgency — a sort of window, I think into how Jesus understood what was happening to him. It is a clear indication that in his death as in his life, Jesus was seeking to fulfil an end.

Indeed this close coupling of Jesus’ life and his death emerges in several places in the gospel accounts. In Mark chapter 10, Jesus speaks of his life being offered as a ransom— a means of freeing the enslaved. The emphasis is on deliverance. And at the last supper he speaks of his blood being shed as the sign of a new covenant, a renewed fellowship between God and humanity.

Both those ideas— ransom and covenant — infer a sundered relationship which is restored by the making of a sacrifice.

And so, here in our gospel this morning it is made clear that even though the accomplishment of this end will mean suffering and death, Jesus anxiously desires to set this process in motion.

Despite the horror of what lay before him, Jesus knew that the kingdom could be established only through the fire of God’s judgement and purification, only through his suffering and death.

In our reading from Hebrews this morning the writer sets before us the example of Christ. He admonishes us to lay aside every weight, every impediment to faith, and to set our eyes upon our Saviour, Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

We are to run the race of life, to follow in his way with his life and his death as our example. We are called to follow Jesus through death to life in order that we may find true fellowship with God and our one true identity. That is what our baptism is about. That is what our being christians is about.

Paul says in his letter to the Romans “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

By our baptism, — by our decision to follow Christ, —we are set apart. We enter a new relationship which may divide us even from our own family.

Jesus speaks of this in the second part of our gospel reading this morning. The Christian is confronted with the reality that those closest to him or her may not respond to Jesus and that their choice will place them on the wrong side of God's judgement. One's family may even actively oppose one's choice to follow Christ.

But there is also another side to it. Because although our decision to follow Christ may separate us from our family ties, as followers of Jesus we enter a new family, gain a new identity and find the promised peace.

Thus while strife and division may characterize the individual Christian's relationship with the world, the angel's promise of peace will characterize the new community.

The biblical scholar Eduard Schweitzer once said "Jesus does not bring the peace and quiet we would expect, but in the ultimate and deepest sense, he is our peace."

For centuries the prophets had warned Israel that the Day of the Lord was coming. Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah this morning was such a warning — although it probably had more to do with the immediate future, the carrying off of Israel to Babylon than with the Day of the Lord.— But it is important to note that the prophets uniformly predicted that the Day of the Lord would be one of mixed blessings. For the prepared it would be a day of light, salvation, and peace. But for the unprepared, it would be a day of darkness, death, and fear.

In this morning's gospel Jesus speaks to those who pretend to be able to read the ways of God. He warns them to open their eyes and see what is happening. God is preparing a scorching fire of judgment and purification. Will they be ready? Or will they be consumed by that which they fail to see? Will they see the coming crisis, risk the right choice and enter the new humanity? Or will they close their eyes and be swept away by the whirlwind

There is always pain involved in the choice to follow Jesus— It means death to an old way of life. It causes division between the believer and the world. In the end, however, it is the only life-giving choice we have. In Jesus we face a moment of truth. How will we choose?