

# **Year C Proper 15**

## **Luke 12:49-56**

I'm faced with preaching from a text in Luke's Gospel this morning that surely all preachers would happily ignore. Can't we just miss this one out and go on to a passage a wee bit less disturbing please? The lectionary doesn't allow us that option and that's one of the strengths of following it. One can't pick and choose at will. One is not permitted to stick to preaching from the familiar texts. It was recently pointed out to me that many churches who consider

themselves to be theologically conservative only have one passage of Scripture read at each worship service and sometimes it's only a few verses at that. On the other hand those who may be labelled 'liberal', and be accused of being less interested in Scripture have up to four passages of Scripture read! The minister may not preach as long but what's more important; the preaching or listening to the Bible being read?

So we have this challenging text this morning. Didn't Luke record at the beginning of his Gospel, the words of John

the Baptist's father Zechariah who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, declared that God was about to "guide our feet into the way of peace"?<sup>1</sup> Didn't Luke record at the end of his Gospel, the words of Jesus, who appearing to his disciples said; "Peace be with you"?<sup>2</sup> So what do we make of this passage when Jesus said he will turn son against father, daughter against mother, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law? There's not an awful lot of peace here! As we can imagine, preachers have sought to

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:79 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:36 NRSV

uphold the integrity of Luke's message and therefore by implication, Jesus' message, by making this passage a case apart. This passage must be different from all the rest and so interpretations have tended to have a somewhat forced feel about them. Quite possibly Jesus was addressing the very significant family fall outs that can lead to major problems. And so it wouldn't take a lot to extend that to the problems that befall the leaders of nations who, so often in the past, were indeed related. Could it be that Jesus was sanctioning a just war between a family of nations? It seems a bit far fetched

for us today but it would not have been difficult in 1914, for example, with Europe on the brink of calamity, to have read the passage in that way. Then in quite different circumstances the passage has been read to highlight the division that occurs when some people within a family accept the good news of Jesus and others don't. This is going to be what it's like when your mother ends up going to church and starts taking this religious thing very seriously and your father doesn't. It's going to cause tensions in your family and it might even push it to breaking point. I have no doubt whatsoever that this

text would have been understood this way in the church I attended when I was growing up.

None of these views stand much scrutiny in my opinion. It is very important when we are confronted with a difficult passage which doesn't appear to sit easily with the stories around it that we don't allow our imaginations to run away with us and come up with an extreme interpretation. The message of this passage fits with all that Jesus has been addressing up until now. Our understanding of this passage must

compliment Jesus' overall message for it to be credible.

First of all it may be helpful to make the distinction between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive. Let me illustrate from a well-known passage in the book of Genesis. Remember when the woman took of the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden and gave it to the man and they eat it. God then pronounced curses upon them. The woman would experience pain in childbirth and the man would toil to till the land which was

cursed because of his actions.<sup>3</sup> When the early Victorians discovered analgesia and were able to come to the aid of women in childbirth with pain relief they refused to do so because they declared that God had prescribed that women must bear pain in childbirth from Genesis 3. However the same Victorian gentlemen were quite content to treat the weeds in their gardens with newly discovered weed killers. Double standards without doubt, but also for the theologically sensitive a wee hint that they might have been misreading Scripture here.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:16-19



Was it not the fact that God was describing the implications of the Fall rather than prescribing what must happen? There is a difference and the difference is important. Here in Luke 12, I would suggest that Jesus was describing the results of his announcement of the coming of the Kingdom. He was not making a prescription; a determination that one will split from the other. Instead he was observing what would happen, and as always the description carried a specific warning to those who thought they knew what all this was about. Don't allow yourselves to get on the wrong

side of the kingdom welcome. Don't be antagonistic to those whom Jesus welcomes. This is only mid-August and we are a very long way from remembering Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his death and our forgetfulness has the potential to hinder us here. Jesus called this death that he was facing "a baptism with which to be baptized".<sup>4</sup> It is this which will bring "fire to the earth".<sup>5</sup> For Jesus now the journey is brief and so he has cranked up the language and is speaking in harsh terms. Jesus did

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 12:50 NRSV

<sup>5</sup> Luke 12:49 NRSV

not come to preserve the social status quo but to obliterate it. Note that in this passage both men and women are divided across the family unit and across the generations. He had already made it clear what he felt about rich and poor, Jew and Samaritan, and of course, men and women.

Do you remember the old newsreel footage of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain coming out of the airplane from Munich brandishing the agreement he had just signed with Adolf Hitler? Later he would announce to the anxious public: “My good friends, this is the

second time there has come back from Germany to Downing Street peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Now I recommend you go home, and sleep quietly in your beds.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of peace for our time we had peace at all costs and it would not do. Jesus came to bring peace but he knew what the rejection of his peace terms would bring and hence the text that we are wrestling with today.

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<sup>6</sup> Faber, David 2008 *Munich: The 1938 Appeasement Crisis*. Simon & Schuster p. 5-7

Then he added salt to the wound by accusing them all of being hypocrites. That is something else. It implies that the people were absolutely aware of the challenge before them and wilfully chose to carry on regardless as if nothing were amiss. They were able to look up to the sky and predict the weather that would be coming so why were they not willing to look at themselves and predict what was coming? They had the means to do so and by implication they knew what the prognosis was, but they chose to carry on regardless. We do need to use the sense that God has given us to read the

nature of the times in which we live and to choose to live for the kingdom of God. Jesus' contemporaries had the tools at their disposal to do this but chose not to. They were aware they were on the wrong track but chose not to face the issue and just meandered on regardless. As a result they were guilty of wilful negligence. Let's not just drift along in life the same way. We all know about the kingdom of God and its demands on us. If we follow the way of the kingdom we walk in the steps of the Good Samaritan, the attentive Mary and so many others. If we don't we will lose our way and spread

division. I'm sure none of us desire that so  
let's renew our commitment to Christ today.