

Division

18 8 13

Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we to pray
and to give more than we desire or deserve:
pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid,
and giving us those things
 which we are not worthy to ask
but through the merits and mediation
of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

My text may be found in Luke chapter 12 and verse 51:

‘Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth ?

No, I tell you, but rather division.’

Sometimes, do you ever come across a verse in the Bible which is a real surprise to you, something of a shock, something that makes you feel really uncomfortable. Today's text, at least for me, is one such verse. When I first read today's gospel, my heart fell. I knew at once it was not a passage I ever wanted to preach on ! That night, I went to bed feeling sad that what is normally a real delight – the exposition of scripture – was something, in this instance, I clearly did not want to do !

Why? Simply because I think of Jesus as 'the Prince of peace'. (Isaiah 9 v6) I think of Jesus greeting his disciples after the resurrection with the words 'Peace be with you.' (John 20 v19) I became serious about my Christian belief because I heard a sermon about 'the peace of God which passes all understanding' (Philippians 4 v7) and when challenged by the preacher, I confessed that such peace was what I longed to find: real peace; perfect peace; 'peace' the third fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5 v22)

So today's text shocked me and I'd like to share with you how I came to make sense of a text that upset me:

'Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth ?

No, I tell you, but rather division.'

To understand any passage of scripture, you need to reflect on the context in which it was written, what the words might have meant to those who wrote them and to those who first heard them and then to work out what they could mean to us, today, some two thousand years on.

Luke, a doctor of medicine and companion of St Paul, is writing, at the earliest, some twenty or thirty years on after Jesus' death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven – events Luke did not witness for himself. Possibly, he wrote some time after the Jewish Wars in the seventh decade of the first century Anno Domini, in the Year of our Lord, in which the Romans sacked Jerusalem and the final resistance in Masada ended in the mass suicide of the Jewish freedom fighters therein.

Whenever precisely he wrote, Luke knew precisely what Jesus was to suffer. He knew what the 'baptism' Jesus referred to in chapter 12 and verse 50 of his gospel meant – Jesus' trial, execution and death when he would be totally immersed in pain and suffering for our sake. 'The fire on earth' in verse 49 might well refer to the persecution of the early Christians first by the Jews and then by the Romans. The division in a family of five: father and mother, daughter and son, and the son's wife, the daughter-in-law, with two divided against three and three divided against two, might typify any family in which some gave themselves wholeheartedly to the faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God who was pointing the way back to God while others remained true to the old ways and wholeheartedly opposed any such new divergent views. No wonder, then, the words of Jesus seem so shocking, so disturbing. The pain is real; the conflict is real. Not nice, not good, but true !

So much for then but what about now ? It doesn't have to be the case but religion can still be the cause of deep rifts in society. In Egypt, we are currently witnessing the struggle between those in power and the Muslim Brotherhood, ousted from power. In Great Britain, you can see evidence of how extreme fundamentalist Islamic belief can shape the actions of disturbed, young, British Muslims. Some sects, like the JW's, are deeply divisive within families, a 'them-and-us' philosophy, a new definition of what it might mean to be religiously kosher. If Catholics hate Protestants and Orthodox are contemptuous of any but their own conservative views of the faith and if some Christians are exclusive rather than inclusive, is it any surprise division exists ? But not only among religious folk of different persuasions can religion be divisive. The new militant evangelising

atheists are contemptuous of any expression of otherness, of deity, of things spiritual, that there might be more to this material world than materialism – God help us! So like it or not, division does exist in our society because we have a choice and we can choose badly.

So where then are we ? I still believe in a Prince of Peace, a God who loves us and wants the best for us. But I also accept that the world can be a cold and hostile place where people will dislike and reject us because we glow with the reflected light of God. Yes, we can still enjoy the peace of God that passes all understanding but it sadly doesn't mean our lives will be trouble free or without division.

What will you choose ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 28 : Division

