


HARD WORDS

Jeremiah 23. 23-29
Hebrews 11. 29-40, 12. 1-2
Luke 12. 49-56

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Those of you who have seen the television show called ‘The West Wing’ will remember the episode in which White House deputy chief of staff Josh Lyman is shot during an assassination attempt on the President. He nearly dies, and it takes months for him to get back to work. But one day sometime later, Josh loses it in the Oval Office and even raises his voice to the President. His friends are shocked. This seems out of character; shrill; vaguely out of control. And indeed it is: Josh is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder linked to the shooting months before.

I wonder if some of the people who were listening to our Lord that day as he spoke at the end of Luke 12 also wondered if something was seriously wrong with him. Jesus seems to lose it a bit here, and his words make us very uncomfortable. We practically need asbestos gloves or very thick oven mitts just to pick these verses up. They are blazing hot!

Our appointed gospel passage comes at the end of a chapter that is chock-full of all kinds of things. Luke 12 treats a number of different themes and provides a multiplicity of images. There’s a parable thrown in for good measure; pastorally kind words about not worrying about our lives; and other bits and pieces. The Lectionary devotes three whole weeks to this chapter alone; and this Sunday we come to the end of it all. And it ends with a bang! In today’s passage, Christ pronounces words that could get a person labelled as a lunatic, both then and now.

What prompted this from our Lord? From the looks of the passage, it appears that just possibly there were some people who were trying to ‘make things nice’ by hushing all possible controversy surrounding Jesus, his message and the kingdom he was proclaiming. Maybe there were some who saw the stir that Christ was causing with the religious establishment of his day; and who were therefore saying, ‘Can’t we just all get along? Come on now, people, smile at each other! Let’s agree to live and let live. Our agreements outnumber our disagreements. Pharisees, Sadducees, Chief Priests, Jesus, Jesus’ disciples, we’re all on the same team. Let’s all start pulling our oars in the same direction, OK?’

Perhaps. In any event, there had obviously been some talk about how our Lord should make things nicer and smoother; because in these verses, Jesus is counteracting what he perceived to be a false impression of who he was and what his ministry was about. Christ did not come to prop up the old ways. He did not come to perpetuate more of the same. His kingdom did not fit in neatly with the kingdoms of this world; and so a strong measure of disruption was to be expected.

Apparently, then as now, it was easy to turn our Lord into a kind of (Rorschach) ink blot in which you could see whatever you wanted, and no perception was better than any other. Some people still talk about Jesus in such terms today. They say, ‘Christ is here to validate the best and brightest of whoever you are and whatever you want.’ Following our Lord is mostly about being nice; it’s about getting along; it’s about endorsing any and every viewpoint.

To all of this, Jesus says a firm ‘No!’ To perceive Christ in that way is to misperceive him and his kingdom. To make the point, our Lord invokes a meteorological image to remind people that they are better at reading the weather than they are at reading spiritual signs. When a dark cloud appears on the western horizon or when the wind turns southerly, folks know what it means. But now that the kingdom of God has

appeared on the horizon of their spiritual awareness, they clearly have no clue what that kingdom means. They think it means more of the same, the old-time religion warmed over.

Yet in reality, the kingdom that Jesus was ushering in represents this world turned upside-down. This is a point that Luke the evangelist has been making from the very beginning of his gospel. Anyone who thinks that Christ's advent would represent 'the same-old thing' only has to read Mary's 'Magnificat' in Luke 1. With startling clarity, Mary foresaw the reversal of the way things normally go; she was inspired to see that the poor would one day be elevated, and that the rich would be sent away empty-handed.

Anyone who saw the kingdom of God as representing 'business as usual' was misreading the signs just as surely as someone who saw a dark cloud and predicted sunshine; or who grabbed a parka coat on account of a strong southerly breeze.

Our Lord knew that his work and the in-breaking of his kingdom would bring a measure of distress, even to the point of cleaving families apart. He certainly was not particularly eager to see such mayhem; but what he clearly was eager to see was the arrival of the kingdom itself. Jesus clearly expresses a deep desire to see the fire kindled, because he knew better than anyone else how badly this world needs the fire of renewal that God's kingdom represents. And if that new kingdom could come in no other way than to cause the conflict that Christ foresaw, then that was the way it would have to be. The main thing was that the kingdom would come.

C.S. Lewis once observed that even Christian people sometimes think that being a follower of our Lord is like being a horse that gets trained to run a little faster than it is used to run. But in reality, Lewis wrote, Jesus doesn't want a regular horse that can run more swiftly; he wants to give the horse wings and to teach it how to fly!

Christ doesn't want to move into the house of our hearts just to slap on a few coats of fresh paint and change the curtains. No, when our Lord moves in, he brings a wrecking ball to tear down whole walls, to gut the rooms down to the studs and basically to build a whole new house.

But that level of change and renovation is hard! We all want to baptise the various practices of our lives with a nice sprinkling of fresh water. Yet Jesus's Spirit comes to us with a baptism of fire that burns up our lives and starts all over. When we resist this level of change and challenge, that is when Christ has to talk tough to remind us that precisely because things are so endemically and thoroughly messed up in this world, we cannot expect that everyone is going to want to go along with his programme. Disagreements are going to arise. Those who remain enthralled with the way life has always been are going to have sharp things to say to those who represent the wrecking ball of our Lord's kingdom.

The difficulty of all this lies in the fact that even though these differences are dramatic, they don't always run neatly along solid black lines that everyone can detect with ease. Rather, these lines and the differences between the world's way of doing things and the kingdom's way of doing things zig-zag through our lives in such a manner that each of us sooner or later becomes adept at picking and choosing. We'll let Jesus have this part of our lives, but not that part. We'll let the kingdom influence our decision-making at home, but not so much at work. Or we'll let Christ have our Sunday mornings, but not our Saturday nights.

Picking and choosing like this makes life easier. It reduces conflict. It helps everyone to get along better with everyone else. Surely even our Lord would want that kind of peace and serenity for our lives, wouldn't he?

Or would he?

Amen.