

Luke 12:49-56

"I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

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. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. 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?"

Fifty years ago, I was in India for a couple of years. I had a wonderful time, and it was the makings of me. I lived with an Indian family, worked with Indian, English and American colleagues, and was, among other things, assistant pastor at an English-speaking church which drew its congregation from expatriates, Anglo-Indians, and, most of all, from local people, who worked on the trains, in the army, at a local agricultural center.

I made friends among many religions. A Muslim imam who ran the local mosque did his best to drill me in classical Arabic; his son was an excellent cricketer, I remember. A distinguished Parsi poet read me her works which, mercifully for me, were in English. I had occasional meals with Christian missionary families and was welcomed at a Hindu bookshop even though I had little money and looked at and read far more books than I bought.

I went to India and returned as a committed Christian. However, in the process, I developed an increasing skepticism about religions as institutions. I couldn't agree with those zealots in all faiths who found only darkness and despair outside their own religious home, who, to employ the dead right but somewhat heavy-handed humor of Jesus, could

readily see the speck in another's eye but not the plank in their own. It seemed to me that all the religions I encountered produced good and bad people, and those of us stuck somewhere in-between; they could all enable love or hatred to flourish.

The years since have only served to deepen my suspicion of institutional religion. My India was the land of Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu who found God everywhere there was evidence of justice and peace; statues of him were then to be found in every corner of the land, and his courage and commitment to peace and justice and freedom were virtues with which many Indians wanted to identify. There were tensions between religions but mostly, ordinary people celebrated each other's festivals. Hindus went to the homes of their Christian friends at Christmas to wish them happy and to stay for snacks, I was welcomed into Muslim homes to break the fast at the end of the month of Ramzan. Religions provided people with joy, community, and hope, and religious differences were an opportunity to consider and practice the virtues of inclusiveness and tolerance.

These days, it is not so. The dark shadow of Hindu fundamentalism now covers India and makes it a difficult place for Indians of other religions to negotiate. It's not just there, of course. All over the world, religions now offer tribalism not hope, exclusive and laughably foolish certainties not ways of engaging with mystery; they are often like inward looking and intolerant country clubs, not generous and welcoming visions of peace and justice.

In 2006 and 2008, I took Aurora University students to Turkey, to meet with people of faith who wanted to show foreigners an Islam that was open and welcoming. Now, Turkey is in the hands of a know-it-all bigot for whom religious generosity is a closed book and democracy a threat.

And here? Almost a quarter of a century ago, when I pitched up to teach at Aurora University, I used to joke that America had too much religion, just as Europe had too little. There's certainly too much bad religion. Contemporary American Christianity is, by and large, appallingly transactional: its value is reckoned by what the believer gets out of it,

whether it be white male power, control of others' lives, money or validation of deep-seated prejudices, held mostly at the expense of others. Love and justice, simple kindness even, are much harder to come by.

It's not just religions that nowadays turn darkly inward, but other ideologies too. England, like much of secular Europe, has set its face against immigrants and flirts with finding the strong man or woman who can recreate an imagined Utopian past. The fact that those who have arisen are laughably inadequate, self-absorbed, needy and clownish doesn't seem to matter.

Like all sensible and humane people, I wish our times were different. I yearn for peace in Gaza and Israel, Ukraine and Russia, I crave hope for all in India and Turkey, it'd be excellent to live long enough to witness the restoration of commonsense and kindness in Britain and here.

Jesus was an idealist, too. But he was also a realist who says, in today's scripture, that we should know how to interpret the present time. He describes families divided against each other, and communities torn apart by hatred and suspicion. That's the world of Jesus, and it's our world too.

For Jesus, is it a desirable one?

This isn't a stupid question. For today's Bible reading isn't necessarily one that liberal and inclusive churches want to hear. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?", Jesus says. "No, I tell you, but rather division!" Even the closest family members will be divided over issues that have real-life consequences. As then, so now. Like me, you'll probably know of gay kids or pregnant girls thrown out onto the streets by Christian families, who think it's the right thing to do.

It isn't. They've got it wrong, profoundly wrong. Because as so often happens, they, or more often their leaders, haven't read scripture carefully.

As our passage opens, Jesus is in anguish. He knows that his message that God's kingly rule means justice for the poor, peace throughout the land, fairness, and the practice of kindness, is divisive. Some heard him gladly, but not others. Members of the religious establishment thought it wasn't his message to share. After all, he wasn't Rabbi Jesus but just a self-taught carpenter, who didn't mind needling religious professionals for their smugness and pomposity. Many of them were content to collaborate with the colonial power and didn't want to hear about any other king than the emperor in Rome. Jesus wasn't a fool. Other teachers and healers had been done away with for making less trouble than him. So, he's scared. His words have divided people, and he himself likely faces a baptism of fire, the possibility and even likelihood of cruel death.

His isn't just the anguish of a man terrified of what might happen to him; it's also the pain of a prophet who preaches justice and peace in a world where wicked people, on the make, will tell any lie, do any vile deed, divide and rule, to make sure that they prosper and others don't. And, if that means using and losing a friend or two, disowning a family member, to gain power, influence and money, that's okay. And they're supported by people who are dumb enough to revere these opportunistic hustlers, even when it isn't in their interest to do so, even if it means bringing good men and women down. Jesus lives with the irony of talking peace and justice in a world where the wicked and the foolish will work to ensure that they never happen. No wonder he's angry and frustrated and scared, all of which we can detect in today's bible passage.

Jesus is saying to his followers, then and across the long years since: the godly virtues of justice, peace, love and hope are divisive. So, choose the right side. What does that mean for us? Be the person who knows that if you interpret religion to make you feel good and comfortable, you're likely delusional. Be the parent who hugs a conflicted or frightened child and doesn't abandon her. Be the individual who can recognize wicked, self-absorbed politicians and doesn't vote for them, even if millions do. Be someone who embodies

hope not smug and silly self-righteousness. Don't be your crazy uncle. Be kind. It may cost you. It did Jesus.

True religion teaches us that it's best to live in the world as someone trying to do good, however intermittently successful, than working to get on at any cost. I learned that long ago in India and am forever grateful.

Martin Forward