

Year C Proper 20 Kindle the Fire Luke 12 49 to 56

“I came to bring fire to the earth,” Jesus tells us today. This passage, at first reading, perhaps seems out of place with Jesus’ message of peace and love. The passage is full of destruction and talk of fighting but a closer look will reveal that Jesus’ words today do fit with his overall message to us and do fit with his mission.

First, let us remind ourselves that Jesus’ mission is to fulfill God’s purpose – the complete reconciliation of all people and all things with God and with each other. The perfect love and peace of God will fill the earth. God’s Peace is not a peace that simply means the absence of fighting. It is the peace that has obliterated the reasons and motivation for fighting. God’s love is not the love that simply tolerates other people, allows us to get along with others we may not agree with or may not like very much. God’s love is the love that destroys the differences between us that cause disagreement and dislike. Jesus came to us to bring us *that* peace and *that* love – the peace and love found in God’s kingdom. And so, Jesus’ message to us is that, with his coming, God’s kingdom also came.

God’s kingdom on earth has most definitely not achieved its intended perfection. We need only look as far as our own imperfections, still living in bodies that will wear out to realize the lack of perfection. We need only look outside the window and listen to the happenings around us to realize the lack of perfection with others and with creation as well.

But Jesus embodied the perfection we await. He knows that this perfection is possible, we are heading toward it and, today, Jesus tells us how this perfection will be achieved and what it will look like as we are heading toward it.

“I came to bring fire to the earth,” Jesus says. He longs for the time when this fire will be kindled because it is this fire that will bring us and the world to perfection. We and the world are in desperate need of an overhaul. A bit of cosmetic surgery will not “cut the mustard,” you could say. It will take major surgery to heal the brokenness of this world and this major surgery, we hear today, is envisioned as fire.

Jesus is not trying to tell us that we and the world are actually going to go up in flames – victims of a raging inferno destroying all in its path. Jesus is providing imagery for us to hold onto. On our last 30 degree day, I was out walking the dog with my son, Kevin, and I said to him, “Ugh...I’m melting.” He and I both knew I was not melting. What I meant, and what he understood, is that I was incredibly hot...sweating but not melting. It was an image to convey meaning.

Although we have good reason to think of fire as destructive – with forest fires destroying acres of land, housefires taking away homes and possessions and sometimes the lives of those in the blaze – the imagery that Luke provides in his Gospel is one of purification and the power of God. Very early in Luke’s Gospel, John the Baptist tells us that, whereas he baptizes with water, Jesus will come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. It is a fire that removes our imperfections and impurities like the refiner’s fire that removes lead, leaving only the silver behind. John the Baptist tells us that Jesus gathers up the wheat and burns the chaff – the wheat is the good stuff and the chaff is the useless outer hull that we don’t want. Fire is the revelation of the good that is there and the removal of the imperfect.

The fire Jesus speaks of is not a fire that needs to frighten us. A woman who died but, after a few minutes, was revived by the doctors told of a beautiful experience of warmth and comfort in the presence of God at her death. She said that she had seen, going past her, scenes of things she had done wrong in her life but there was no sense of shame or guilt. She explained to the hospital staff and to her family that there was only an intense feeling of God's love and forgiveness as these scenes disappeared. We are not condemned because of our brokenness. We would all be doomed to life without God if that were the case. We do not need to fear the purifying fire of God but we do not ignore our brokenness either. We are to continuously strive, with God's help, toward the perfection he intends for us. We are to live in a way appropriate to our identity – we are children of God, members of Christ's body.

We became part of Christ's body through the mystery of baptism. Jesus speaks today of his upcoming baptism. He has already been baptized with water in the Jordan River. The baptism he speaks of here, is his death and resurrection.

Jesus expresses a lot of excitement and eagerness waiting for these things to occur – "I wish the fire was already kindled," he says. He is under stress until he is baptized he tells us. He has good reason to be excited and eager. The fire and his baptism of which he speaks will bring the new age of God's kingdom. The fire is a fire of change, God's active presence in the world bringing about the perfection of his kingdom. Baptism is *our* way of being an integral part of this change. Jesus yearns for God's kingdom to be complete on earth as in heaven and wants us to kindle that passionate yearning within ourselves too. Luke has already stoked the fire of this yearning through the heartfelt praise of Mary. After learning she will

give birth to the Messiah, she proclaims that God is making good on his promises. God is making all things right. We hear this message again and again in the opening chapters of Luke. Zechariah at the birth of his son John the Baptist echoes Mary's sentiments: the light will come to those living in darkness and in the shadow of death and will guide our feet into the way of peace (1:79) he announces. Simeon holds the baby Jesus in the temple and, again, echoes Mary: he is holding the Salvation of the world he tells us. Then there is the prophet, Anna. Hearing what Simeon has just proclaimed, she too approaches the child and calls out to everyone around that they are looking at the redemption of Israel. One after the other, excitedly praising God and passing along the news that God is doing what he said he would do. God is bringing all things toward perfection.

Jesus shares this excitement in the knowledge that things are moving in the right direction, God's kingdom is arriving among us. "Jesus yearns for "the kingdom of God" to break forth into the world in all its fullness. The transformations and justice that [Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna] envisioned are the things that he wants, too. That means that oppression has to go. Greed has to go. Idolatry has to go. Same with exploitation, dehumanization, narcissism, and any other evils you can name that prevent the flourishing of all people and all creation." Perhaps you have a cause that brings feelings of righteous anger, of passionate desire to make it right. Jesus feels that righteous anger, that passionate desire to make right *every* wrong in our world. "Those contagions are rendered powerless in the presence of God" (Matt Skinner, workingpreacher.org).

Jesus knows his crucial part in this. He knows he heads towards death and he willingly goes. His death and resurrection demonstrate victory over the worst that

the powers of the world had to offer. His death and resurrection open the door into God's kingdom for everyone else who chooses to enter.

It is not an easy route to fully enter into God's kingdom. Jesus tells us today that his message of release and transformation is bound to cause division. Those invested in the present order; those lured by the temptations of wealth, status, and power; and those who rule now will resist this coming kingdom for it spells an end to what they know and love (or at least have grown accustomed to).

Jesus is not against peace – he is the Prince of Peace, the giver of a peace that the world does not understand. Not everyone you know will understand and believe. Even people who say they believe and follow Christ sometimes don't get it right, still exhibiting behaviours that absolutely do not belong in God's unified and loving kingdom. Households will experience division over my message Jesus says. Some will want to continue to follow the ways of the world, others will want to follow Christ. Even the household of God experiences division for various reasons. Sometimes we ignore the message. Sometimes we justify our ignoring of the message. We also sometimes misunderstand Jesus' message and get things very wrong. And then, when we realize we are wrong and try to correct the mistake, there are people who don't think we have made a mistake and cling to the error. Individually and together, some people don't want to change and some people don't think they need to change. Yet every one of us and the world must change. Paul tells us we are to transform into the likeness of Christ. That certainly requires ongoing change.

People and power structures are changing and Jesus chastises his listeners for not being able to see this. We understand changes in the weather that are coming

because of the signs around us. We should be able to recognize and understand the signs of the arrival of God's kingdom he says. We *are* fortunate to be living in this time of the arriving kingdom because changing times give us the opportunity to change. Immediately after we hear Jesus, today, ask, "How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?" he follows this up with, "Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?" and be reconciled rather than try to settle disputes according to the ways of the world?

Jesus is once again teaching repentance and the urgent situation in which humanity currently finds itself as we stand in this in-between time when the world's kingdoms and God's kingdom co-exist. Jesus in Luke speaks of repentance as a changed mind. It is what happens when we look at ourselves and our world from God's perspective — according to God's commitment to justice, God's peace, and God's pledge to meet us in the love and solidarity we share with our neighbour.

As we look at ourselves and the world as God sees them this helps us see the present time for what it is, to interpret the signs and know God is at work, the fullness of God's kingdom is unfolding before us and within us. This is not a never-ending time. Jesus' words today are part of the same teaching we heard last week when he urged his listeners to be ready, be dressed and have your lamps lit. The master is coming and we must be prepared for his return. We hear this urgency again today in Jesus' eagerness: I wish the fire was already kindled, he says. The present is an available but diminishing time to align ourselves with the priorities of life with God in God's kingdom. We must grasp the eagerness, the excitement, the passionate yearning for the fulfillment of this kingdom as Jesus

did and then we and others will pursue the things that make for peace (19:42). We pursue these things in a time of deeply rooted divisions. It won't be easy but we are following the One who knows the way.

Yet again, I turn to Mother Teresa for wisdom. She asks us, "Do we believe that God's love is infinitely more powerful, his mercy more tender than the evil of sin, than all the hatred, conflicts, and tensions that are dividing the world? than the most powerful bombs and guns ever made by human hands and minds?" Her answer is, "yes." My answer is, "yes." It is "yes" for many of you. And so, she goes on to say, "Don't search for Jesus in far lands – he is not there. He is close to you; he is with you. Just keep the lamp burning and you will always see him. Keep on filling the lamp with all these little drops of love, and you will see how sweet is the Lord you love" (*Mother Teresa: Her Infinite Wisdom*, pp.12-13).

"I came to bring fire to the earth," Jesus proclaims. Our lamps may not burn large but they do burn with the whole strength and power of God within us – the Holy Spirit. Imagine what God can do through us when all of our lamps burn together. As the body of Christ here on earth, we are the fire that Jesus brought. "How I wish it were already kindled," he cried out then. We know what time it is. Let us kindle that fire.