

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

“I came to bring fire to the earth,” Jesus tells us today. Perhaps this 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.

Let us remember that “in all things [Jesus] fulfilled [God’s] gracious will (BAS p.194) – striving for the reconciliation of all people and all things with God and with each other (Col.1:20; 2 Cor.5:19) so the perfect love and peace of God will fill the earth...God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven. 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 (ex. Mark 1:15).

God’s kingdom on earth has most definitely not achieved its intended fullness. We need only look as far as our own imperfections, or outside the window at the scars on the earth, or listen to the news about the happenings around us. 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.

“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, imagery to convey meaning.

Although we have good reason to think of fire as destructive, the image of fire we find in scripture (ex. Mal.3:3; 1 Cor.3:13, etc.) is one of God’s presence and purifying power. Very early in Luke’s Gospel, John the Baptist tells us that, whereas he baptizes with water, Jesus will 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 tells us Jesus gathers up the wheat and burns the chaff – the wheat is the good stuff; the chaff is the useless outer hull we don’t want. Fire is the revelation of the good that is there and the removal of what doesn’t belong in God’s kingdom.

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 came and went. 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 the 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 fulness of his kingdom. Baptism is *our* way of being an integral part of this change, sharing, too, the excited longing and eagerness. 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, 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). Simeon holds the baby Jesus and echoes Mary: he is holding the Salvation of the world he tells us. Next is the prophet, Anna. Hearing what Simeon has just proclaimed, she 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 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 willingly heads toward death. His death and resurrection demonstrate victory over the worst that the powers of the world have to offer and open the door into God’s kingdom for everyone who chooses to enter (the *Te Deum*).

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 and even, at times, justify our ignoring of the message. Sometimes we misunderstand Jesus' message and get things very wrong. And then, when we realize we are wrong and try to correct the mistake, there are always some people who don't think we have made a mistake and cling to the error. Change is difficult 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 tells us, as we stand in this in-between time when the world's kingdoms and God's kingdom co-exist. When we try to look at ourselves and our world as if from God's perspective — that is, 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 — this can help us to recognize and know that God *is* at work, the fullness of God's kingdom is unfolding before us and within us.

This, though, 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.

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 can be 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.