

THE CALL FOR DECISION

Salvation has drawn near

Luke 12.49-59

Introduction

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”

What about Christmas?

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

I can almost hear the late Christopher Hitchens whispering, “See, I told you so. Religion poisons everything.”

So what is our task this morning? Get comfortable thoughts out of uncomfortable words? Ignore them? Mangle them?

Let’s see if we can find a way in. Let’s start with the back story.

The back story

Both the psalm (80) and the passage from Isaiah (5.1-7) help us to get a feel for the mix of emotions and words weaving their way through this passage. And there are emotions and tough ideas aplenty.

Jesus is stressed out of his brain. He says confronting things. Without doubt there is a hostile response hanging in the atmosphere. The journey is fraught.

Remember this discussion takes place in a sea of ideas and metaphors that make up the way Jesus and his disciples and the crowds and the opponents read the world and lived in it.

Isaiah 5 tells us that Israel is God's beloved vineyard that he has poured love and nurture into. He set up a defence for it and he looked for it to be productive; wine from great grapes.

But it went feral. How did it go feral? What went wrong with his pleasant planting?

“...he expected justice,
but saw blood shed;
righteousness,
but hear a cry!”

Psalm 80 pictures Israel as a vine that God has especially brought out of Egypt. And it flourished. But it turned for it life elsewhere and it shriveled, becoming prey to the wild. But they cry to God. And cries are heard. Save us, restore us, let your face shine on us. Cries are important in the story. God is not deaf to them.

People in Jesus' time and place were crying to God in much the same way. But the politics, as always, muddied the waters. They read their world under the Roman empire as one of captivity, unable to worship God as longed to do.

Naturally that threw up all kinds of movements ideologies; revolution, Temple and the Law, to respond to this need. Rome was like the wild boar that was destroying God's vineyard. The vineyard seemed neglected, overgrown and it is being ravaged and fed on.

And now Jesus has come on the scene and says, 'God is on the move again; I am the son of man at the right hand (Ps 80) and I am answering your cry to come and save us.

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine;
that we may be saved.”

God has answered your prayer, come to you and now the time is upon you to decide. Hence all the parables, the miracles, the teaching.

So why can't you interpret the times? 54-56

They can read the weather. In fact they are very good at local weather forecasting. Clouds rolling in from the Mediterranean means rain; wind from the Negev means hot sultry and uncomfortable times.

So why can't they look around at what is going on and read the signs? They can see the oppressive Roman occupation, the cruel whims of the Herod family, the arrogance their wealthy temple leaders, the political consequences of the revolutionaries' mad drive to independence and the burden of Pharisaic impositions of the law.

Then a man comes healing the sick, setting the lame free, the blind see and the Satan is put down. Why can't they see that this is crisis point of the history of Israel. This is what the people of God have waited for so why don't you grab the opportunity?

The choice should be easy but it isn't. We live in an age when we hand over personal responsibility to social forces. It wasn't my fault they told me to do it. I don't know what to do because there is so much white noise on social media.

Jesus rejects that notion. He rudely calls them hypocrites; play actors, people playing a game on stage. They want God's saving power and presence but they do not wish to be the light of the world. Just get rid of the Romans will do then you, God, can get back to your business and we will go about ours undisturbed. However Jesus suggests that:

They would be well advised to take action while there is still time 57-59

That is the point of the little parable about the accuser and the judge. Jesus is referring to the crisis situation in Israel. Israel, rebelling against God's plan for them to be the light of the world, and pushing rebellion against the Roman overlord was bound to find themselves dragged off to court to face charges of rebellion and sedition.

This would mean complete ruination. It was time to seek mediation on two fronts; with the Romans and with God. As far the Romans are concerned we know the warning went unheeded and the Romans came and Israel paid a terrible price, in loss of life, property, freedom and dignity, the effects of which last until today.

And God? Would they trust this prophet? Can't they see the way of putting things to rights lies with the wandering prophet who brings the Spirit?

There was still time. In fact 40 years were to elapse before the Romans came. Would they accept that God had come to answer their cry that they could be God's people again, alight for justice and peace, mercy and hope for the world?

To this point in the story the response is No.

Thus Jesus' expresses his deep frustration 49-53

These words frighten us, disturb us, make us feel giddy and send us off balance. That is why I wanted to tell the back story this morning. Jesus' presence is a divisive presence. Jesus is not an advocate of peace and unity like a wandering soap box philosopher might be. That would imply that we could fix the mess up ourselves with a little ethical tweaking here or a little social botox there. After all these

years we know that such actions produce a very fragile peace and violence lurks just below the surface. Our nightly news is full of the failed experimentation emerging from the enlightenment. We are awash with violence.

Jesus is passionate about the transformation required to make the world work according to God's right. And they and we have to make a decision about that. In Jesus' day the crisis was rushing upon them and the decision was necessary.

That time of decision was like fire; hot, painful and possibly destructive. In this Gospel the fire can refer to judgment and the Holy Spirit. The decision belongs to the people: transformation or calamity.

That time of decision was also Jesus' baptism, not with water but on a cross. If they made the decision against Jesus, which now seemed inevitable, then the cross, a violent tortuous state killing, was the only consequence possible.

And the time of decision, the decision of transformation in the Spirit or disintegration by violence, would set people against each other. Peace on earth does not come as a consequence of violence. It simply ends hostilities until the powerful side finally wilts and dies.

To go the way of God's right in the Spirit is through the cross that destroys violence. We are born into that story that contradicts the present prevailing story. It says that the power of the cross destroys the power destructive violence. It demands we become new people in the Spirit of peace, to be lights pointing to a new restored world.

So what can we make of this difficult passage?

God's purpose for us is that we, as God's people, engage in Israel's task; to light up the world by living out God's transformation in the Spirit. That is why we exist. God purposes to transform the world and is doing so now. God never desists from that task; that the world should be as he made it to be.

The cross and the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit are all to that end. The breaking of the power of evil, the vindication of Jesus' way through the resurrection, and the unleashing of the Spirit who created the world we now celebrate every Sunday. We pledge ourselves every Sunday in the Eucharist to be resurrection people in the Spirit.

Can we read the times? Have we developed the skills of discernment to be able to discern the Presence moving us? Can we read the great signs of the times? The great movements of people, governments, nations and policies? Can we address the events that surround with a discerning word, an action that changes things? That is what prophets do.

Are we ready to be deviants? Will we choose and trust the faithfulness of Jesus? Or is our religion but a sanctimonious sanctification of the dying light of the west? Have we gone to sleep on the job? Are we too cosy and comfortable in our sheltered workshop called Australia.

Are we serving the Risen Christ and the beautiful world in which we live?

These are my spiritual questions that I wrestle with every day. I hope you do too.