

Trinity 11, Proper 15, 19 August 2007

Jeremiah 23:23-29
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Coo. What a Gospel. How have clergymen and the C of E ever become associated with respectability, with middle-class comfort, with boringness, when there are bits like this?

This passage comes after Jesus has condemned pretence, warned us about our obsession with material security, and advised us to be on our guard. And its two messages are that if we follow the master (1) there will be conflict, and (2) we must learn to read trends in the world around us.

How does this fit with the bringer of peace we celebrate at Christmas? Is there something odd about the Christmas stories in the gospel? There might be ...

Or perhaps our notions of peace need examining. Peace, shalom, salaam, salvation, redemption are really all the same. If you ask an Israeli about peace, they might well say that it means security, and security means being well defended, and that means being ready to fight. And that's so not only for modern Israelis, but also in Hebrew Scripture: battles, tent pegs through heads, lovely stuff.

This is far removed from the awful, colourless niceness that some Christians seem to exude, the sort of complacent blandness that makes me want to stick two fingers in their eyes. Is this really what peace is all about: papering over cracks and doing whatever's necessary to offend the fewest people, even pretending that things are otherwise? Think about Jesus in Palestine. He was talking to a group of people who were just becoming familiar with his message, who were members of families, quite probably, that would disapprove of his subversive and counter-cultural message. So perhaps he needed to shock them to get them to see what he was driving at.

He attacks families. Well, families can be quite stifling. Old family loyalties can conflict with, for example, the loyalties of the newly married. Family loyalties can be evil (gangsters). Families can be exclusive, xenophobic. Over mothering becomes smothering. Church families can be so matey that they exclude visitors and newcomers. Perhaps these are some of the unhealthy aspects of family that we should wage war against, so that we'll be free of unhealthy attachments, the more ready to fight what needs to be fought.

If you want an abscess to heal quickly, you take the knife to it and drain the pus. Be assertive and clean out the diseased tissue. You have to break into the abscess first. You can't heal something if it's not broken: that's what the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension story tells us. And it is that breaking that we will shortly re-enact and take into ourselves in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

So how best do we take action to clear out the unhealthy bits of society? What can YOU do: individually. It's not someone else's job, it's everyone's job. And be in no doubt: we, the church, the clergy, are largely irrelevant in this country today. The CoE is a minority institution with a majority complex: it thinks it's important. It is widely mocked: perhaps that's a good thing. The church seems to do best when it is persecuted. Perhaps we should encourage this persecution.

The Epistle tells us not to lose courage, not to lose faith, but to press on. Perhaps we will find peace and redemption only when we have been disturbed enough to see the extent of our pretence. When we've shattered the complacency that stifles: the butterfly emerges only after shattering the constraining case of the chrysalis.

Peace on earth and goodwill among men are like heaven, promises for the future. Until then the church militant here on earth has a revolutionary job to do. Not the church petulant, or the church hesitant, but the church militant.

'the church exists, despite all its failings and all its historically acquired clutter, because the disturbing, provocative, impractical, loving and utterly God-centred Jesus got himself crucified. The God vindicated this God-centred way of life, love and being by raising Jesus up.' David Jenkins 1984

When 'peace on earth and goodwill among men' is accomplished, and the church triumphant rules, the church will have done itself out of a job.

God the disturber: Jonah's life.
God the shaker-up.
God the destroyer.