**#50 All Saints 14 August 2022, Trinity 9**

Jeremiah 23:23-29

**23**Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off? **24**Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord. **25**I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ **26**How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? **27**They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. **28**Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the Lord. **29**Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Luke 12:49-56

**49**‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! **50**I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! **51**Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! **52**From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; **53**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.’

**54**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. **55**And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, “There will be scorching heat”; and it happens. **56**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?

We’ve had a couple of fairly spine-tingling readings today. I felt like I needed a cold compress after hearing them. We could have had Hebrews too, you can see it on the red sheet – that’s pretty uncompromising as well; mocking, flogging, being stoned to death, being sawn in two. We seem to have some angry religious folks with us today. And not just in the congregation…it’s a Trinity 9 to remember.

Its good to remember the challenge of the ministry that we all follow. Jesus’s words *are* challenging, here and in many other places too. We will soon be offering the Peace to each other in our service, and we will really mean it when we say ‘The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you’, when we offer that hope and love to each other. And yet, what do we hear Him say here? ‘I bring division, not peace!’ What are we supposed to do with that?

The easiest Anglican way is to do what we do with, I suspect, quite a lot of challenging Scripture. We ignore it. Or, we walk alongside it might be a better way of putting it. We’re all happy, and rightly so, to remember scripture fragments like ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’, for instance, those moments when Jesus is the Jesus that we expect, the Jesus whom we want to encounter and whose words we can take away with us to sustain us.

And then! We crunch up against readings like this. I used to think Luke was a ‘fluffy’ evangelist, and that Mark and Matthew were a little harder – John’s another thing altogether, of course, floating over here somewhere – but the more I read, the more challenging Luke becomes, here and in Acts. And today, this is strong medicine from ‘the beloved physician.’ The same story is told in Matthew 10:34-36 too, where he says, ‘I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.’ Its Revelation-like in its technicolour prophecy.

And if we wind back a little, to Jeremiah, things aren’t much better there, are they? God is concerned that dreams are replacing what he actually said, that prophets are just getting it wrong. Dreams are all ok, but God’s word is, rather, ‘like fire and like a hammer than breaks a rock in pieces.’ So not quite a floaty as dreams and visions sometimes are.

So in many ways, Jesus, in Luke, is being faithful to that scriptural tradition, that of a muscular prophetic ministry, words spoken by people who *call out* the iniquities of the world, who challenge the status quo, who point out how things need to be different to how they are now.

Jesus *was* a prophet, after all; I wonder how often we like to think of him AS a prophet, stemming from and drawing on the tradition of the old prophets? We call Him Saviour, Lord, Son of Man, Son of God, lots of names, but is it the radical, challenging prophet that comes to mind when we think of him? Possibly not. We see him today at his most radical, challenging, provocative and confrontational. I love it because it fleshes out a picture of him in many more dimensions than we sometimes allow; he’s far more than just an all-round good guy.

It's a worrying thought, isn’t it? We *are* about to share the Peace, and that sits uneasily alongside our readings. But Isn’t Jesus often a source of crisis, alongside being the source of peace?

This apparent disconnect emphasises for me that our faith, belief, theology, call it what you like, is made up of fragments that we try to lock together. Its when we try to impose a full coherent picture of it all – some would call it a systematic theology - that we struggle. I’ve found the theologian Duncan Forrester useful in this. He argues for an *unsystematic* theology – he thinks the natural state of humanity is to be fragmented; and so, if we have fragments of theology to try to understand our Bible, then why are we surprised?

After all, Jesus quite often communicated through fragments. We receive his word in fragments, in slivers; ‘Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth’ for instance, is a fragment of theology – nothing is explained, its just stated - and our minds then try to make a compete ‘thing’ from them. So it’s not what Jesus says that’s necessarily the problem – it’s us, in trying to make an absolute coherence between all of the sayings of this brilliant and ever-inventive collection of writings, from this exceptional mind that chose to come and live amongst us, that creates the problems.

I think we’re better off, and more productive as disciples, if we regard ourselves as Christian scavengers – taking the fragments that we pick up that we know can apply to ourselves and living by them but also recognising the fragments that challenge us. They challenge us because fragments often have sharp edges.

So – lets not worry about this apparent fracturing, and fragmenting that we find on days like today when we ask ‘what do we do with what Jesus says to us today?’ Our faith is not a matter of a complete intellectual understanding, of unquestioning consent to the rightness or the wrongness of a creed or a doctrine; our faith is not a system that needs us to understand it wholly or not at all. I like the notion of a modest theology, made up of fragments, rather than worrying about absolute coherence.

Let’s walk alongside Jesus’s prophetic fragment of faith from Luke today – consider it, wrestle with it, know it’s there, wonder what he’s giving us – and remain firm in the knowledge that, even in challenges such as are thrown down in Luke, we love, and we are loved. That’s the fragment that transcends all others.

Amen