

Luke 12:49-56 — not peace, but division.

In 1965, in his top 50, genre-busting hit Subterranean Homesick Blues, Bob Dylan famously sang 'you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows'. Jesus must have been referring to that song when he talked about observing the winds and reading the signs of the times.

Humour aside, this is again difficult stuff. Many people have read this and taken Jesus literally — seeing him either as a revolutionary in the modern literal sense, or have used his words to justify their own violence. This is nonsense. Jesus was not Che Guevara and the briefest examination of his life will show that he had abundant opportunity to personally take up the sword and lead people in revolution, but refused this at every turn. He was utterly pacifistic in his own actions. And yet he speaks of bringing fire on the earth (and wishing it was already lit) and division within households. In the parallel in Matthew's gospel he says, 'I have come not to bring peace but a sword!' So let's spend a few minutes seeking clarity on Jesus bringing fire and division.

Change for the better nonetheless brings disruption and conflict. Things get worse before they get better. In the Yoxmere Fisherman I recently cited the example of the Turkish alphabet reform of 1928. The decision to change the way a language was written down was bold, but pursued for excellent reasons. The Latin alphabet (which we use), is used by 70% of the world and can better represent the sounds of Turkish, whilst Arabic characters, which Turkey was using, is used by a much smaller number of people worldwide, and is *much* harder to print. It took extraordinary efforts to retrain the people, redesign signage and everything. But they did it. Even change for the long term good can require extraordinary disruption, and within that a need to compel changes (for good) on those who don't want change.

Or, better, let's think of societal changes. Ending slavery in the US was the right thing to do, but a civil war was fought over this. Ending segregation in the US was equally the right thing to do, but was met with violence and resistance. Even now racism is not 'over'.

Within the Church of England there was considerable conflict over the ordination of women to the roles of deacon, priest and bishop, and since those votes were passed by General Synod women in ministry suffered terrible prejudice at the hands of traditionalists. This still has not ended.

For the alternative perspective, what if we were so conflict-averse that we suppressed our desire for change allowing those with the most power or the loudest voices have their way? Would we tolerate a present peace at any price? Before the second world war some sought to appease Nazi Germany, or at least the very least look the other way. Making peace with evil is the wrong peace to make.

So: Jesus ushered in change — a surprising amount! While Judaism had not remained static through the centuries from Abraham to the time of Jesus (and continued to develop through to the present day), Jesus showed first century Palestine the Lord in a new way: a grace that rested upon God's love and Jesus's self-giving; an emphasis not on law but on love; a change of worship from temple and sacrifice to assemblies and communion. Some were very much for this change, others opposed it violently — crucifying Jesus, and then killing Stephen, James, Peter, Paul and many more early church leaders. All of the violent division came as a negative reaction against the winds of change. As such the 'fire' was not Jesus's doing. But he spoke the truth, revealing the Father, speaking uncomfortable truths to those who held power, and his *peaceful* truth nonetheless conflicted with all sorts of people. Jesus did not meet violence with violence. He suffered crucifixion and by so doing absorbed much of that violent opposition, before rising again, vindicated in his claim to be the son of God.

In the passage we have read Jesus says "I have a baptism to undergo". He is not referring to his baptism in the Jordan, which had already happened. He is referring to his crucifixion. Often baptism means death in Jesus's allusive language.

I remember being at St Edmundsbury Cathedral when the Archbishop of Canterbury came to mark 100 years of this diocese. The legalisation of gay marriage in the UK had happened that week. And so the Archbishop was asked about the prospect of gay marriage within the Church of England. He answered that permitting same-sex marriage in the Church of England was likely to lead to the persecution and killing of Anglicans in other parts of the world, and that this thought kept him awake at night. He did not answer whether he *personally* thought permitting same-sex marriage in church was right or wrong. He knew that even his opinion had extraordinary power. Given those thoughts, what do you think was the right thing to do?

At various points I have wondered what Jesus thought about what he was doing, knowing that his preaching would bring about both his own crucifixion, but also the martyrdom of most of his disciples! And when I say that, I'm not implying that any part of his ministry was regrettable, nor that the disciples didn't know exactly what they were in for when they began to preach Christ crucified and risen from that first Pentecost onwards. Peter, James, John, Paul and the rest all knew the consequence of preaching the gospel, and carried on, as if they had a cheat code on death. Which, in a way, we do. Still — Jesus knew that by speaking as he did and being as he was a world of conflict was coming. And he did it anyway.

One final point — while Jesus speaks of fire and division, there is another kind of fire that Jesus ushers in — the fire of the Holy Spirit — so characterised because she is powerful, unpredictable, contagious and ardent.

How then do we behave, having chewed over this fiery passage? We still worship the prince of peace who tells us that peacemakers are blessed. And so we must be peacemakers still. But our peace must firstly be with the Lord, after which we may seek peace, unity, atonement, with our family, friends and neighbours. We still refrain from judgement and gossip. We continue to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to give our shirt as well as our cloaks. We seek peace, but understand that the gospel *does* put up the backs of those who feel judged in Christ. We seek peace, but we do not compromise on truth, or in our integrity. As Jesus warns the hypocrites, so we are wary of hypocrisy.

It is easy to be so ready for conflict that we are forever in a position of high alert, ready to give as good as we got. Calm down. Don't speak or say anything until you have checked in with the prince of peace through prayer. Or perhaps you are unguarded and in surprise you overreact. Know that visible, humble faith (expressed without fanfare, avoiding street corners) is still a challenge to many.

Perhaps this is a moment of encouragement for you. You do know God, and what God desires of you. You can see the immediate loss, but trust in the long term gain. Trust in God, see the ultimate good of his way, and be courageous, in the power of the Holy Spirit. It was with such courage not only that Jesus won the victory over the grave, but the early church flourished. May the church flourish in our courage, too.

Amen.