

Sermon for 9th Sunday of Trinity: Signs for the Perplexed.

Hebrews 12:1-3

1Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Luke 12; 49 - 56

49"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! 51Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. 52From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. 53They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

54He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. 55And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. 56Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"

I started the service by asking if people were ever perplexed. Church is a good place to find some peace - even if today's gospel seems perplexing! Our first reading encourages us to keep going, 'the great crowd of witnesses' cheering us on.

Sermon

In our reading from Luke's gospel we heard Jesus say some apparently perplexing things, we heard that he came to bring fire to the earth, that he came also to bring division, even between families, and the reading ended with Jesus condemning as 'hypocrites' those who cannot read the signs of the times.

Have we caught him on a bad day, should we perhaps turn the page in the hope of finding him in a better mood?

The bible can often seem perplexing, that should not be surprising, all the complexities of humanity are present within the pages of the bible, and human life is perplexing indeed.

In understanding the perplexities of the bible or the perplexities of our lives, the key is to trust Jesus, to remember he is our friend and saviour, and to allow that trust to see us through.

So rather than turn the page, I think we should dwell a while with our perplexities and see if we can discern anything through them.

Let us consider our gospel reading a little more carefully.

The fire that Jesus longed to bring is probably a reference to Pentecost when the fire of the Holy Spirit came down on the disciples. The baptism he had to undergo before this could happen was the crucifixion. He is speaking of the crucifixion as a baptism because his baptism in water prefigured his death and resurrection - he went down into the waters of death and up in to new life. Hence, the fire he longed to give could not be kindled until after the 'baptism' he had to 'undergo'.

The fire of the Holy Spirit is sent to warm our cold hearts that we might love others as Jesus loved us. Such fiery love is life giving, the Church flamed into life at Pentecost, and even now the cold stones of our churches can be enlivened by the fire of Pentecost. Let the fire of the Spirit consume your soul and flame out to those around you and then the Church will blaze with life.

Can you imagine such a church, a fire of blazing love at the centre of the community, at the heart of Parish life?

People would be drawn to the flame from all around, but no doubt some would also walk away. They would walk away because such love is consuming. Not for nothing are we tempted to be cold hearted, that way we do not get hurt, that way we can live to please ourselves, that way we do not have the inconvenience of caring.

Being a disciple of Jesus requires that we forgive those who hurt us; it requires that we labour in humility as servants of others; it requires that we stand up for the truth.

In this world if you live like that you may get crucified.

As Jesus warns, love brings division, 'five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.' Love does not seek division, love holds out the hope of peace, but the damning truth about humanity is that we sometimes turn away from love.

Jesus knew that in holding out the love of God for all to receive, some would reject him, that they would drive nails through the very hands that offered them peace. As we heard in our first reading, "...he endured the cross, scorning its shame", but that reading ends with Jesus "sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Thanks be to God, the testimony of the resurrection is that 'love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death'.

The resurrection was not just a sign for the disciples, the resurrection is a sign for all time, it is a sign for our confusing times. Yet sometimes we cannot read the signs of the times, and we even lose sight of the cross as a sign of eternal hope. In our Gospel reading we heard the challenge of Jesus, 'How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?'

Are we a generation that doesn't know how to interpret our own times?

We have the testimony of the Church, "that great cloud of witnesses", written into the pages of the New Testament and in our liturgy, we have the sacraments, and we have each other in the body of Christ, a faithful testimony to the love and power of God, but do these present times cause us to lose hope?

The pace of change in the modern world only seems to increase, and that eats away at our points of reference. Karl Marx wrote of the Capitalist age as characterised by, the 'Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation... All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.'

Our age is characterised by the constant dismantling and reassembly of the sign posts that once helped us understand the landscape of our times, all that was once holy is being profaned.

Within a generation the moralities of yesterday have become the offensive bigotry of today, what could once be said and affirmed is now condemned.

My parents, my Father born in 1920, my mother in 1930, if they were still around today I doubt they would be able to navigate today's moral landscape.

“A kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh, The fundamental things apply, As time goes by...” Is that still true?

The times in which we live are perplexing.

Of course, the truth is that every age of humanity has been perplexing, but that thought only helps a little. It is the confusing signs of our own times that cause our hope to ebb away.

I started this sermon by recognising the apparently perplexing nature of our gospel reading, but suggested that we should proceed by trusting in Jesus our friend and Saviour. It is often in the difficulties of life that truth is revealed, even if at first it seems that the truth has become obscured. At such times we have to hold on to Christ's wounded hand and proceed in trust.

The signs of the love of God in this world are there for all to see, and our perception and trust can be restored by acts of love. Fear and anger confuse – love clarifies. When we risk the rejection and hurt that can be the consequence of offering Christ-love then we discover that light is indeed stronger than darkness, and we discover that the testimony of the resurrection is still true. Love engages and reveals truth, the same truth revealed in Jesus, that ‘God is love and those who live in love live in Him, and He in them’.

Love of God and neighbour has always been the basis for morality, and the cross is still the ultimate sign of this, there is no greater sign than the eternal crucified for love of the mortal.

The cross is a sign for all time, set down in history as a reference point so that we may never lose sight of the love of God, even when the signs of our times are confusing.

So let us pray that we engage our times with the fiery, world transforming love of God.

We say together this prayer by G.C.Binyon,

'Almighty God, our heavenly Father, whose Son Jesus Christ came to cast fire upon the earth: grant that by the prayers of thy faithful people a fire of burning zeal may be kindled, and pass from heart to heart, till all our hardness is melted in the warmth of Thy love; through him who loved us and gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Amen.