

Sermon: 2019/08/18 (10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) - Isaiah 5:1-7 & Luke 12:49-56_BTR

[Invite children to the front. Various colors of PlayDoh on a tray.]

The prophet Isaiah offers us a history lesson this morning.

And it's all about Israel:

about how God chose Israel to be special, and *really* invested Himself in her, for *many* centuries.

He sent miracles and angels and prophets to help her out, again and again.

But she let Him down - *badly*.

She didn't respond *appropriately* to all of that *gracious* assistance.

And so was punished - *badly*.

And all this is told to us by way of a parable; *symbols*.

So, it goes like this:

once upon a time there was a farmer - that's God, by the way.

Who chose a fertile hill in a land that consisted mostly of deserts.

This was the "symbol" for the Land of Canaan.

Now, there were a few rocks on this hill, which were spoiling it.

So, the farmer cleared them away.

Those "rocks" were the (pagan) Canaanites.

They weren't a very nice lot, so they had to be got rid of.

And then, to protect the hill, he planted a hedge *all* around it.

And this 'hedge' was a symbol for the "shield" of His love.

Finally, in the soil on the hill, He planted some vines.

And, at first, they seemed to grow really well.

But, when harvest time came, he found that the grapes they had produced were small and bitter and not good for eating: *Yuk!*

Now, what He really wanted were big, juicy, sweet grapes.

And, given all His efforts on the hill, He was *right* to expect the best crop.

Not the horrid, nasty stuff He was given.

So, He crushed it all flat and decided to start again.

And you and I - the Church - we *are* that second beginning.

So we must be careful to produce good "grapes" - not actual fruit, of course; I'm talking about making "good" choices.

Let us pray: ...

[Dismiss children.]

“I came to bring fire to the earth”, and division, “father against son...mother against daughter...[etc.]” [Pause.]

Ever since those *dreadful* shootings in El Paso and Dayton, I’ve heard more and more *reasonable, sober* people begin to talk about the possibility of a (second) civil war.

One of the most remarked upon sources where this idea was “floated,” was the high-profile German magazine, *Der Spiegel*.^[n.1]

We’re not talking here, then, about some minor blog crying out for attention. You’ve probably heard the expression, “click bait,” right? Well, I frankly find such talk alarmist and unhelpful. It “escalates” a conversation that, really, needs, desperately, some “cold water.”

Yes, we’re seeing “pockets,” outbursts of violence from both political extremes. No doubt, passions are “running high.”

And, *to a certain extent*, that is as it should be, yes?

If politics is about justice.

If politics is about flourishing.

About, “dignity.”

And yet since Americans disagree about these fundamentals, then, it is no wonder that we see *discord*.

We’re *accustomed* to think about such matters “*dividing*” opinion and people (from one another).

So, it is interesting that, if the famous preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon is right that “[p]olitical divisions are but trifles compared with [the concerns of religion].”^[n.2] - Which I think he is - we’re *sooo*(!) surprised to find the Savior speaking - *embracing* the fact - that what He has to say will bring a “fire” of division.

This is the Gospel He is referring to.

The “Good News.”

Isn’t it supposed to do the opposite?

Well, it *always* has ‘divided’: ^[Lk. 12: 52,53].

In Moses’ day, we hear that hundreds of thousands of Hebrews departed with him into the desert, leaving their homes behind in Egypt.

Six hundred thousand, to be precise: [Ex. 12:37].

But that's not all.

We often overlook the next verse - verse thirty-eight: 'A mixed crowd also went up with them...in great numbers'.

So, let's be clear, as the Jews marched out *as a group* - unified, single-minded, like an army, a ragtag "bunch" of... admirers, I guess - *anonymous* Gentiles - people of other faiths and backgrounds followed them.

Out into the vast unknown.

That's people, then, who had *no* connection to Canaan.

That's people who, presumably, had only ever heard whispers of that legendary "*Promised Land*" around slave-pit camp-fires - whispers of how it was a place that "flowed with milk and honey."

That's people who, presumably, unlike the "Chosen People," had *a lot* to lose by undertaking such a perilous, foolhardy adventure.

That's people who, presumably, unlike the "Chosen People," went out from Pharaoh's kingdom *and didn't have their whole tribe and clan with them*.

But made a choice.

A choice to leave family behind.

And friends.

To leave behind the familiar.

Because, although it worked - Egypt, that is, - the most advanced country in the world at the time - it had roads, a bureaucracy, canals, irrigated fields of wheat, temples, banks, money-lenders - it was corrupt.

It *ran* on injustice.

Injustice; inequity; *exploitation* was its fire and its fuel.

And if you were okay with all that; if you were shrewd and conniving - the opportunities to become wealthy were fabulous.

And yet '[a] mixed crowd' of nobodies decided that they'd rather take a chance on a voice from a burning bush than be a somebody in *that* system.

And Jesus asks us whether *we* are willing to join that 'mixed crowd' too?

To "leave behind" or, as He puts it, "divide" ourselves from others who don't share our *Christian* commitments.

Not by abandoning a shared space for a foreign country.

But by what we do.

By making visible, *pronounced* differences to our business practices, the way we speak, the things we watch on TV, the politicians for whom we vote, what we do with our money.

To *not* be average.

Or "typical."

But, instead, to "draw" rigid, uncompromising *and uncomfortable* lines "in the

sand."

Because that's what a commitment to Christ as *Lord* entails.

To have an unmistakable allegiance to Him and His *narrow "Way"* - an allegiance that replaces and over-rules all other allegiances, whether to my relatives or my class or my party or my nation.

And others - non-believers, none church-goers - won't like that.

They may criticise and mock and put pressure on us to conform.

And at times like those we'll wonder to ourselves, "But isn't Jesus 'the Prince of Peace'?"

And doesn't that accolade mean we're supposed to do everything and anything to ensure that there is harmony and goodwill wherever we are?

But I urge you to be careful about assuming that the "peace" that Jesus and His Gospel establish is a peace for the here-and-now.

Rather, perhaps it refers for the life hereafter.

Yes, there will *be* an eternal calm and tranquility when Christ returns, but until then the Bible is explicit - and (the Book of) *Revelation* in particular - that the sheep of His "flock;" His disciples *will* find themselves *in* conflict with opposition of some sort of another.

Jesus, in other words, is truly the "Prince of Peace," but *only*, really, from an *eschatological* point of view.

"Eschatology," of course, remember, is the theologian's posh word, which means, "End of History."

Until then - the "End of History," He warns us, in the final sentences of today's passage, the faithful should expect storm-clouds - and that we might ferment some ourselves.

But let's not fret.

Or worry.

Because the Kingdom *is* drawing near.

Literally, I'm certain. (It must be.)

But also *right now* in you and in me.

In the presence of the Holy Spirit, dwelling in us.

Who, if we ask Him, will offer us tantalising tastes of the lasting pace that will come from above.

So, if you are grieving.

If you are anxious.

If there is something that troubles you...

ask for God to intervene.

He is watching and listening.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/el-paso-und-dayton-waffenwahn-rassismus-todesschuesse-amerikas-neuer-buergerkrieg-a-1280446.html> But see also: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-america-headed-for-a-new-kind-of-civil-war> And: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/10/will-we-have-a-civil-war-a-sf-officer-turned-diplomat-estimates-chances-at-60-percent/>
2. Spurgeon, Charles Haddon (2017), 'A Sermon to Open Neglecters and Nominal Followers of Religion, Delivered on the Lord's Day, Morning, March 24th, 1866, at the Agricultural Hall, Islington', in Uyl, Anthony (Ed.), *Spurgeon's Sermons, Volume 13: 1867*, Woodstock, O. N.: Devoted Publishing, pp. 108-115, 109.