

Faith as a matter of life and death

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost +10 C: Isa 5 1-7, Ps 80 1-2, 8-19, Heb 11 29-12.2, Lk 12 49-59

The high emotion of today's scriptures is about faith as a life-and-death matter – that your life can be in danger because of what you believe. That's normally alien to us. We think we live in a pretty tolerant culture. But then we encounter internet trolls or hear of white supremacist rampages, and we're forced to think differently.

But for most people of the world, these scriptures speak directly to their experience of life. Most of the world knows life's fragility far more immediately than we do. Most live a hand-to-mouth existence. But probably their greatest difference from us is that most people live in a vividly spiritual world. We don't any more. The steady increase in our prosperity has seen a corresponding decline in our spiritual life. Our precious consciousness of fragility and mortality is drowning under our stuff.

So we come to these scriptures today spiritually handicapped. *They* speak out of a world that we only visit as tourists, or that only comes home to us when tragedy strikes us or our loved ones. I don't know how often I've heard the OT written off as judgmental and violent. But it's actually true to life for the majority of humanity who've never left that real world. So let's enter that world for a few minutes.

Actually, we have little choice; Jesus pushed us straight into it today. *I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!* ^{Lk 12.49} The NT scholar Alan Culpepper helps

us approach this saying with more understanding by taking us to the non-Biblical Gospel of Thomas. There, Logion 82 reads *Whoever is near me is near fire; whoever is distant from me is distant from the kingdom*. Culpepper puts the two sayings together and writes, 'Although the Kingdom of God is always characterised by reconciliation and peace, the announcement of the kingdom is always divisive, because it requires decision and commitment.' ^{Luke 266} Fire in Luke often means judgement (3.9, 17) and it's clear that Jesus believes he is in no way going to be spared: ^{12.50} *I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!*

Ever since the moment we read about on that last Sunday in June where Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem, ^{Lk 9.51} he lived under the threat of that baptism which members of Luke's community knew only too well; a baptism in his own blood.

^{12.51} *Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!* Remember Culpepper's thought, 'the announcement of the kingdom is always divisive, because it requires decision and commitment'. If you hold to your integrity strongly enough, you'll inevitably arrive at lines in the sand you won't cross, or meet people you can't go along with. And in this whole section of the Gospel ...*the prophet's journey to Jerusalem*... Jesus has been preparing his followers for their coming life of just such a radical discipleship; we've seen him

- training them for mission (10.1-24 Mission of the seventy)
- teaching them how to pray (11.1-13 Lord's Prayer)
- teaching them how to fight evil spiritual forces (11.14-26)
- teaching them how to resist conservative religious factions (11.37-53)
- and encouraging them in personal ethical integrity

(12.1-48)

This is all pretty standard, team-building stuff, isn't it. Luke's community needed material like this to sustain them in their struggle for identity and validity in the face of persecution and ostracism. But Jesus doesn't stop there. In a move from that standard, predictable stuff, he launches into the unspeakable. Jesus goes on to claim a commitment from his followers that challenges the basic unit of all that is to be valued in the Middle East—the family.

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.*

Luke is clear about how central the family is to everybody's identity in his time and place. Luke tells us the unforgettable stories of the prodigal son ^{15.11-32} who wished his father dead and the rich young ruler ^{18.18-25} who couldn't sell his possessions. And into that all-important family culture, Jesus says he's come to bring division. We can be in no doubt that what Jesus teaches here is deeply offensive; deliberately offensive.

But by the same token, we need to acknowledge that for many of us now, what Jesus teaches here may well be a painful fact. Our commitment to Christ is often something which highlights divisions between ourselves and our friends, and even divisions within our families and church communities. When I do training programmes in marriage preparation and enrichment models, they certainly wake me up to that again. Families and churches can be dangerous places.

Extreme sectarian groups will sometimes call on a passage like this one to justify isolating their followers from *infidel*

family-members and friends. But there is no sense in which Jesus is calling people to reject one-another in his name. Rather, he is saying that a decision to follow him as a disciple will necessarily expose the forces which work against that discipleship. Those forces are *the false gods of*

- appearances, personal power and control culture ³⁷⁻⁵³ The hypocritical religious leaders,
- finding security in wealth ¹³⁻²¹ The rich fool,
- and a life lived in fear ²²⁻³⁴ Consider the lilies...

To an extent, the traditional position of the family in the Middle East had virtually attained the status of the sacred. There *is* great good in this – belonging, generosity, security – but it could be distorted. Then anything and anyone could be sacrificed on the altar of family honour – and as we know, still *is* in many traditional communities, with the hideous practice of so-called honour killing. And because of our vulnerability in our families – and in our Church communities – there must always be challenges to our integrity as Christ's people. Those false gods – the gods of appearances, personal power and control, of security in wealth, and the cruel oppression of a life lived in fear – those false gods were – and still are – alive and operative in families and communities. Jesus came – and sends us – so these evils will reveal themselves, and people might be rescued from such prisons. Amen