

Luke: chapters 12-14
“I came to set the earth on fire”
“Do you suppose that I came to bring peace to the world?”

At the centre of this month's readings from Luke is a difficult reading, one that is bound to disturb us. It is a long way from a comfortable and comforting “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild” Our readings this month aim to disturb.

We begin with the Parable of the Rich Fool (12:13-21), who spends all his energy planning to build a bigger barn, only to die before it is even begun. The Parable of the Watchful Servants (12:32-40) reminds us that the “Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him.” Both of these readings focus on keeping watchful and ready, keeping our eyes on the things of God rather than the things of this world.

The final two readings are stories of the Sabbath. Jesus heals on the Sabbath (13:10-17) to the consternation of the religious authorities, and our final story is of a Sabbath meal (14:1,7-14) where Jesus warns the guests who place themselves in higher places than are rightfully theirs. He then turns on the host and his choice of guest; the poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind are those who should have been invited.

At the centre we have the disturbing passage of teaching that I quote from at the beginning (Luke 12:49-53). Jesus sets the earth on fire. He does not come to bring peace; rather he comes to bring division, division within the closest family units. Clearly, Jesus intends his listeners, and us to be disturbed from our peaceful and habitual complacency. But what is he really saying?

“I came to set the earth on fire”. The sentence sounds negative and fierce. But fire does not only destroy. A fierce fire can purify. Fire is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus' words, Luke returns us to the preaching of John the Baptist, who has told us that Jesus is coming to ‘baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire ... he will gather the wheat and burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out’ (3:16-17).

John the Baptist's preaching takes us from the fire into the next part of this passage, Jesus has come to separate the wheat from the chaff, to bring division rather than peace.

Discipleship, following Jesus is not an easy choice. It is one that demands our focus and watchfulness (the first two readings of the month). It is one that asks us to re-consider our cultural and social assumptions (last two readings of the month), as we try to follow the kingdom of God rather than of the world. As individuals we need the fire of purification, our chaff has to burnt, leaving the good and wholesome wheat. We have to decide which kingdom we will follow. We need the fire of the Holy Spirit to help us in our chosen path.

The Bible Reading Fellowship's commentary on Luke includes a prayer for each section of the gospel. The one for this passage that comes at the centre of our month's readings can be used as a prayer in response to all five of our readings this month:

*Lord, you have warned me.
To follow you is demanding.
You demand that my whole life should be focused on you.
You take away from me
 all the evasions of comfort and luxury.
You demand that I serve all those around me,
 As you served your disciples.
You warn me of strife and division.
You want a decision now and every day.
You offer me the fire of your Spirit,
 and the life of your baptism,
and you promise finally to claim me for your own
 before your Father Amen.*

Mary Witts.