

“On Fire: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly” – Luke 12:49-56

Well, it seems like the brief interlude of showery weather is over and we are back into the hot, dry stuff again. Especially here in BC weather like this is appreciated but it always raises concerns over the forest fires. Already this has been a hard season for fires – during May there were so many fires in BC that we had to delay sending help to fight the Fort McMurray fire. It’s been a bit better since then, but with the return of the hot, dry weather the danger will increase again.

But in addition to forest and wildfires we note other kinds of fires burning these days, and sadly many of them are in the church. You can hardly pick up a newspaper any more without seeing a brush fire in one or another branch of Christianity – divisions, splits, fights, and people turning away in droves because of the infighting. You may even have been following the vitriol posted online as our own denomination considers the relationship between sexuality and faith. And to top it off, we just heard a reading from Luke’s gospel that seems to underlie much of this tension in the church. While the text might provide some explanation for the tension, it is a confusing text. Did you not come away from hearing it asking yourself, “but what about Jesus saying, ‘peace I give to you’, or ‘I give you the peace that passes all understanding’?” Let’s take a deeper look at the text and see if we can make some sense of it.

As always, we need to understand the context in which these words from Jesus were cast. The part we read comes at the end of a longish section of teachings and sayings from Jesus. He has been going forehead-to-forehead with the Pharisees, and then dealt with the scribes (church lawyers ... may God grant us peace!) who “began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.” (Lk11:53-54) Jesus then turns and speaks to the growing crowds, warning about hypocrisy, and deals with the question about riches and what is really important. He then speaks to his disciples – confirmed by Peter’s question whether the parables are for them or everyone – about the demands of leadership. This is the point where we enter into the conversation between Jesus and his close followers. The first part of our reading, the part about division, is to the disciples; the second part about interpreting the ‘present’ (i.e. Jesus’) time is once again to the crowds. We’ll begin by focusing on the first part, otherwise we can – like so many people – get easily led astray.

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” I think there’s a subtle but very significant clue there as to what he was talking about in that curious second part of the sentence to which we pay so little attention. “I wish it were already kindled” ... the fire that Jesus brought had not yet been lit. Not yet lit ... that’s what the phrase means. So many questions: Why not yet lit? When would it be lit? What kind of fire? I think the answers to those questions will come clear, so please bear with me.

What kind of fire? The Greek word for fire here is ‘pur’ ... the root for our word ‘purify.’ Images of smelting, of purging by refiner’s fire, separating the gold from the dross (slag) start to come to mind, as do images of cleansing utensils by fire. The word ‘fire’ invokes all kinds of images, both helpful and harmful. From the earliest times that people huddled together in the most basic of communities, the fireplace was a source of life-giving energy. Warmth to fend off the cold of clear desert nights and fresh new tundra; heat to cook food, making it more palatable and even to preserve it; energy to dry the furs and clothes of hunters; light and warmth to comfort the young and the aged.

Fire also provided the first controllable light for humanity, offering a means to push back the spooky darkness of deep forests and dangerous caves. Light to perform indoor tasks in the long Arctic nights; to provide beacons in the deserts for returning hunters and trading travelers;

to repel attacking beasts; to provide early-warning alarm systems against danger from stranger or neighbour.

Not all fires burn hot and cleanly, however, and smoke is an inevitable byproduct. Fresh green wood burns badly, as does that which has been soaked with rain. Some smoke is helpful, offering relief from nasty gnats and other biting insects; other smoke is used to preserve meats in very tasty ways; smoke has long been used as a signaling mechanism during the day.

However, not all uses of fire have been so benevolent. The heat of fire has been used by zealots in the church to stifle progress – images of dark dungeons and glowing instruments of torture during the Inquisition trying to root out reformers comes readily to mind. People burned at the stake for the outrageous crime of trying to bring the bible to people in their own language is another gruesome reminder of the misguided use of holy fire to quench dissent against those in the church who considered themselves the sole repository of God’s truth. Of course you didn’t have to go so far as to translate the bible to get burned at the stake – any attack against purist orthodoxy was sufficient reason: hint that the world was not the centre of the universe, or that – gasp – it might even be spherical instead of flat, and you were toast! Suggest that the scribes and Pharisees of the day might just be wrong in their literalist (and self-promoting) understandings, and you would be the next to feel the heat.

Smoke was also – and sometimes continues to be – used in other than beneficial or ethically positive ways. Smoke provides a means of obscuring, of hiding what is being done, and there has been plenty of “blowing smoke” in the church. Coverups of nefarious deeds probably come first to mind.

So were these mixed good/bad images the kind of fire that Jesus claims he came to bring, but which had not yet been kindled? Again, the “not yet kindled” gives us a clue that he was most likely talking about a different kind of fire. After all, all of the uses and misuses of fire we just looked at had indeed been kindled by humanity in Jesus’ day and long before as well. So what fire was it that had not yet been kindled? If you still haven’t caught on, let me give you another clue – what other key incident involving fire was highlighted by this gospel writer? Aha, yes – recalling that Luke and Acts are really two halves of the same writing – by now you probably are thinking about the tongues of fire descending on the disciples at Pentecost. Could this be the “not yet kindled” fire of which Jesus speaks? I think it is most likely Jesus is referring to the fire of faith brought by the Holy Spirit, an energizing force that brings life to his followers, that stirs them into passionate discipleship.

And there’s the key to the division issue – passion. It seems difficult to believe that Jesus saw his primary role as bringing division and dissent, especially when set against all that he said and did to bring about reconciliation – reconciliation between humans and God, and reconciliation between people and each other. His “Great Commandment” centers on a theme of bringing people together with God and each other, not separating them. However, here he talks about divisions among people. It is interesting to note that the examples he lists set young people against old, and set people in conflict with established social and even religious customs and strictures. Respect for elders such as sons to fathers and daughter-in-laws to mother-in-laws was not only a long-honoured social custom but was even proscribed as a religious law enforced by the scribes and Pharisees. The divisions Jesus gave as examples revealed challenges to firmly-established church laws, rules, and customs.

It is no wonder that Jesus could see divisions and strife coming as a result of his preaching and his actions. Talking to a foreign woman at a public well, for example. Or sitting down to eat in a Pharisee’s house without first washing. Touching – and healing – lepers and

other sick people, some on a Sabbath no less! Challenging the firmly-encrusted power trips of the Pharisees and the scribes, on their own turf. Claiming that anyone who believes was not only acceptable but accepted into the kingdom of God. These signs and actions of grace were highly offensive to the religious purists (pun intended – ‘pur’-ists) of his day who ruled by ordinary fire and who could not yet acknowledge the divine power of the kind of Pentecost fire that Jesus was about to ignite.

That Pentecost fire offered a totally different set of characteristics than the kind of fire used in church dungeons and secular prisons. Instead of a coercive and torturous heat of branding irons setting sinners visibly apart from the righteous, this new fire offers the warmth of God’s sustaining love, the life-giving embrace of a God gracious enough to offer his only Son to bring it. Replacing the obscuring smoke of scriptural interpretation available only through “official” channels is the illuminating light of the Word of God made flesh in Christ, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead those who believe into all truth – not just one limiting version of the truth.

And so yes, passions would indeed be ignited by the Pentecostal fire that Jesus came to bring. Those passions did run deep, and continue to run deep, because they centre around faith issues, issues of life and the meaning of life, and the meaning and importance of faith. Passions can be good – but sometimes not so much. The world has seen more than enough in these past nine or ten years of passions lived out radically, passions deep enough to cause people to violently destroy themselves in order to destroy others around them. Nobody can accuse radical fundamentalists, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or of any other religion, of not being passionate about their beliefs – but we can and should question whether the passions truly represent the central message of the faith.

How can we know the answer to that question? I would say the answer to that lies in recognizing that we are called to hear the whole message of Christ – to hear his promise of reconciliation with God to all who believe; to hear his Great Commandment to love God with all that we are and to love each other as we have been loved by God; to embrace the Pentecostal fire of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter who will guide us into all truth; to see all people as equals in the eyes of God. In so doing we will keep burning brightly the fire brought by the One who is the Way, the Light, and the Truth.