

Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild??

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Luke 12:49-56 Year C – Pentecost 15

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There are few sayings of Jesus in the New Testament that grab our attention quite like this passage from Luke this morning...fire, divisions, hypocrites! You certainly won't find these words quoted on many refrigerator doors, beautifully crafted cross-stitch hangings, nor as part of any sentimental Hallmark moment. And we could be forgiven for being perplexed with these words. Wasn't this the same Gospel writer who began his Gospel by proclaiming that this child, this Jesus, would be the one who would guide our feet into the way of peace, and who would later conclude the Gospel with Jesus' appearing to his disciples with a benediction of "peace". And how can the one who tells a parable of reconciliation between father and son in the Prodigal Son be the same one who sets parents against their children and children against their parents? Did Jesus not bless with peace the sick whom he healed? Did he not teach his followers to bring greetings of peace as they traveled the country to share his good news? These are intense words of Jesus. It almost feels that on some levels Jesus is shouting. What happened to Gentle Jesus meek and mild? Well, as far as today's readings are concerned, Gentle Jesus, meek and mild is nowhere to be found.

Yet despite everything else that these words stir up in us, it is impossible to miss the passion in Jesus' words. Jesus spoke these words en route to Jerusalem, his final trip to Jerusalem, knowing that his time was short, there was an unmistakable urgency to his message, that clearly weighed down heavily upon him. He had come to humanity with a mission, and as he neared its end, he needed to be sure that those who would carry forward the truth of the Gospel really got the message. Jesus knew that this Gospel, this Good News that he had been sharing was a radical Gospel. It upset the power structures of the day. It broke ancient social barriers; it challenged the conventional thinking of his time. Yet as stark as it may seem at times, in Luke's Gospel we see God's consistent love made visible to us in both the wonder of Christmas Eve with the babe in Bethlehem AND in the heat of certain encounters with the divine, like the one described here today. Jesus meant these words to burst into the lives of those who heard them, exploding into their lives at every level. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild ... I don't think so.

Just as true today as it was when Jesus walked the earth, the good news of Jesus Christ, ... it is meant to change us. It is meant to smack up against who we are, how we live, and the choices we make. All change - even Good News change - can cause conflict and grief for the simple reason that to take up something new means giving up / letting go of something old. It means we re-evaluate our values and adjust our priorities. Just in case in the whirl and buzz of our daily lives we slip into complacency, there are passages like this one today to catch our attention, and having caught it, to hold it, and to focus it according to a way of thinking guided and directed by the Holy Spirit and principles of the Kingdom of God ...principles that Jesus had spent the last three years speaking about and demonstrating to all who had ears to hear and eyes to see.

I don't believe that by saying these words Jesus sought to subvert families as such. Christ did want, however, to divide his disciples both then and now from those things that distract us from our mission, God's mission really. Christ put forward a vision of God and God's agenda for change which often stood in direct conflict with other claims, like wealth, possessions, land, culture, religion and family. But no matter what prescription Jesus would give to those who came to him for help and direction, it was clear that only when the 'God part' was taken care of first, that everything else fell into perspective.

Having caught our attention in this passage and challenged us to live by God's principles, Jesus concludes with a question, "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" ... a provocative question that presumably is meant to poke and prod us into taking more care at interpreting the times in which we live ... more care in making sense of the reality in which we live and into which God wishes to have his good news proclaimed.

Now interpreting, or making sense of the times in which we live, can be difficult to be sure. Did you know there are consultants who are paid millions of dollars by large corporations to read the trends in the times in which we live? Because, of course, in big business it is important, even crucial to know where society is headed. If you can spot a trend and ride that trend, there are fortunes to be made. However, even the experts can often be way off the mark. For example...

"This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us." Thus read a Western Union internal memo, 1876.

"The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?" David Sarnoff's associates in response to his urgings for investment in the radio in the 1920s.

"I'm just glad it'll be Clark Gable who's falling on his face and not Gary Cooper." Gary Cooper said this about his decision not to take the leading role in "Gone With The Wind."

"We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out." Decca Recording Co. rejecting the Beatles, 1962.

So, given that interpretation, making sense of the present time is tricky, even for the best amongst us, why is it that we do not know how to interpret the times in which we live? Well, this morning's passage does not give us a precise answer to this question and I couldn't help but wonder if that is because this is a question that in some ways we each need to be asking ourselves on an ongoing basis. We can, each one of us, begin by engaging in our own forecasting as a follower of Jesus by discerning the signs of the times. What elements of our lives hinder our service to the God of the lowly and powerless?

And like as with Jesus there will be a baptism of fire for us, yet we can surely take comfort in the simple fact that the Lord who comes to baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit first embraced his own baptism experiencing all that he did in being obedient to the father; that we might know healing and reconciliation; by his undergoing judgment, we might know pardon, and by his suffering death that we might know life, both now and in the world to come.

Thus, looking backward to Jesus and his baptism, we find the courage to look both deep within ourselves, and to look forward to discern the signs and challenges of our own times. We join our hopes and fears to those of Christians throughout the centuries by praying, "Come, Lord Jesus." Come into our lives as we open all we are to the truth of your Good News. Let it touch us and shape us and make us able to see your Holy Spirit blowing across the landscape of our lives and the landscape of our times.

Gentle Jesus meek and mild ... well, not in today's Gospel, but rather a passionate Christ ... a Christ intent on the renewal and development of all those who seek to be followers. Thanks be to God!