

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 15
Year C

Jeremiah 23:23-29
Psalm 82
Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2
Luke 12:49-56

From the nativity stories, we are used to hearing about Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Therefore, when we hear this reading from the Gospel according to Luke, the contrast is jarring. Our inclination is to view Jesus as a warm, caring friend, while here we have a statement coming from the lips of Jesus that states that He brings not peace, but division. He comes to bring fire to the earth. This is not the same image of Jesus with which we are most familiar. What is going on?

Several commentators have stated that this is the hardest passage of scripture to understand, precisely because it sounds so foreign to us. This is not the message we want to hear. However, if we look closely, we see many situations where there is discord, even among the Twelve. We see arguments over who should be the greatest, who should be entitled to sit at Jesus' right hand in glory, and who are His family. Why should we be surprised here when Jesus says there will be division? Throughout His ministry, Jesus was confronted by those who opposed Him. Why should we expect anything else?

We must remember the setting for this passage in Luke. Several chapters earlier, we read that Jesus has set His face toward Jerusalem. This is His final trip to the center of the political and religious world of the Jews. Jesus knows what He is to face when He arrives, hence the comment about fire and baptism. One of the interpretations of this fire is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which will come upon the disciples soon. The baptism is Jesus' death on the cross, as we read in Mark's Gospel in His discussion with the sons of Zebedee. The Greek image presented here is one of total absorption in the mission before Him in Jerusalem. His stress, as we read in this translation, is really His focus on the path ahead.

It is significant that, when Jesus is discussing the divisions to come, these are generational, vertical divisions. They are divisions along lines of relationships of dominance and submission, superiority and inferiority. People will see disruptions in the social order. Looking at the world around us today, we see these divisions being manifested in families and communities. Parents and children do not agree on basic rules of conduct. Teachers and students are at logger-heads in the classroom. Some might even look at union-management relationships in this same light. But, most importantly, we see this in the church as it is manifested in conflict between pulpit and pew. No longer is the church the dominion of males alone, but the voices of women must be heard as well.

Jesus does not stop here. He next turns to the constant quest for signs. In Palestine, the weather is controlled by two geographic factors - the Mediterranean Sea to the west and vast deserts to the south and southeast. The wind coming off the Mediterranean brings rain, while the wind coming

from the deserts brings hot, dry conditions. Everyone in the region knows this, so predicting the weather is only a matter of testing the wind. Jesus chastises the people for knowing this, while they do not understand what is happening all around them. To what is Jesus referring? The present time is the coming of the Kingdom of God which He has been preaching. The people know when it is going to rain, but they don't understand that the Kingdom of God is in their midst. We are all selective in what we watch. A businessman might follow the stock market, someone in the military might watch the temperature of international relations, a student might try to discern how a teacher might grade papers or what upcoming exams might cover. All of us focus on what we feel is important. Jesus is trying to shift our focus to His message that the Kingdom of God is close at hand and that the end of time is near.

Where is our focus? What is important to each of us? Are we focused on the insignificant at the expense of what is truly important? Jesus is warning us that there will be division and conflict in our lives. Are we prepared or are we focused on the minor things of life while missing the important clues that surround us? That is what Jesus is asking us today.