

Thoughts for Eastbourne 18th August 2019

Rev Ray Coats

Luke 12: 49-56

“Peace and Harmony?”

Here we find Luke reporting what he knows of Jesus' words. He is also likely to be speaking to his own audience, c. AD 85. By that time, the new Jesus movement had disrupted any number of families. Letters survive today of Roman families complaining that their children had run off to join some group called "Christians." Prior to that, no doubt some Jewish families also felt division within them over some family members' loyalty to Jesus.

But Jesus said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising upon west, you immediately say that rain is coming, and it comes to be so. And when a south wind blows, you say that a scorching heat will be, and it comes to be. Hypocrites. You know how to interpret the face of the earth and of heaven, but how do you not interpret this present time?"

In a nifty parallel to his mention of fire and water, Jesus, for the first time since verse 21, now speaks explicitly to the crowds and comments on peoples' ability to read meteorological indicators regarding coming rain (water) or coming heat (fire).

The signs in clouds and winds could indeed spell trouble. Clouds rising from the west, from the Mediterranean, sometimes brought intense rain with significant local flooding. Likewise, wind from the south, from the Negev desert, could sometimes raise temperatures thirty degrees in an hour.

Jesus spits out the word "hypocrite." This section began (12:1) with Jesus warning about the Pharisees and "their hypocrisy." He had excoriated the Pharisees for being outwardly impeccable but inwardly "full of greed and wickedness" (11:39), for being punctilious about law, but forgetting "justice and love of God" (11:42), and for

angling for respect and position, while being "unmarked graves" (11:44).

The Pharisees, in other words, are known for outward cleanliness, religious observance, and hierarchical self-promotion, yet, really, they are filled with greed, support injustice, and don't love God.

Worse, the crowds have let themselves be influenced by the Pharisees, Jesus says. Indeed, Pharisees are "unmarked graves" which others walk over unwittingly and are affected by them (11:44). Jesus is saying that the people are assuming the categories and worldview offered by the Pharisees without thinking very much about it.

Hurling the word "hypocrites" is like a slap in the face designed to snap somebody out of it. Stop it, the slap says, and get with reality. You do quite well at reading meteorological signs, Jesus says, so why can you not read the signs of "this time"? Division in the family is an indicator of social crisis (Micah 7:6). The increase of stress, anxiety, and division is all antecedent to the breaking in of God.

Unfortunately, the reading stops at 12:56. In the next verse, Jesus exhorts the crowds to "judge for yourselves what is just" (12:57). In other words, don't let the pharisees do your thinking for you. Think for yourselves!

In AD 85, the time of Luke's writing, the Pharisees were rivals to the nascent Jesus movement. The Sadducees--the power elite of the Temple, and prime movers behind the assassination of Jesus--had ceased to exist when the Temple fell in AD 70.

Over and over we hear the world should be a place of "shalom". That beautiful Hebrew word means "peace and wholeness" in all aspects of life. However, when we read the Bible, we're not more than a few chapters in when we read that the world was filled with violence and conflict. And it's been that way ever since, hasn't it? One of the things we often forget about Jesus is that he came to a particular people in a particular place at a particular time in history. And we

also forget that Jesus came to the Jewish people at one of the most turbulent times in Israel's history, a time of impending crisis.

Most of us can't imagine what it's like to live in a country with enemy soldiers patrolling the streets, checkpoints where you are regularly stopped and asked for identification, and places where you have to pay special tolls and bribes just to go about your ordinary business. But that's what it was like in Jesus' Israel.

And when Jesus talked about a coming judgment, he wasn't talking most of the time about what we told by most fundamentalist preachers is "*the last judgment*," at which (beware!!) some people will be sent to "*heaven*" and others to "*hell*." No, he was talking about a day, soon to come, of violent reckoning when the Roman armies would trample Jerusalem, raze the temple to the ground, and destroy the Jewish nation. That is what happened in the year 70AD.

This background is essential for reading today's Gospel. Here we hear Jesus reprimanding the people for not being able to recognize the signs of the times. He warns them that they mustn't view his ministry and teaching as that of just another religious leader, teaching them the way to live in peace. No! Instead his coming will introduce a season of profound trouble.

This passage reminds us of a couple of important truths. The first is this: although we celebrate Jesus as the Prince of Peace — the Prince of *Shalom* — *shalom* only came to us through a time of great distress and suffering. It reminds us that the world is often a violent, hateful place and that Jesus didn't shy away from talking about that or getting involved in life's mess. Indeed, he walked right into the midst of this violent world and was baptized with fire himself when he was forcibly arrested, falsely tried, and nailed to a cross as a criminal by the ruling powers. The peace we enjoy in Christ came only because he was willing to submit himself to violent death.

This passage also calls us to be realistic about the world in which we still live today. Whether or not we are facing an impending crisis like

Israel would experience, this world is filled with trouble and conflict. Bad things happen. Crises occur. People act violently and hurt others. The ruling powers can be corrupt. Religious leaders can lead us astray. In times of stress, people can turn on each other, even family members. We know this. We read and hear about it every day still. We see it on our TV and computer screens. We lament the daily loss of life, the crisis of people who flee the violence and become exiles from their own homes. We weep over lives turned upside down, children who grow up in chaos and hunger, families torn apart by competing allegiances, uncertainty, and fear.

This gospel text we've read this morning likewise describes a troubled, violent world. It tells us about Jesus, who was born into such a world, right at the point of one of history's great disasters, when the Romans virtually destroyed the people of Israel. We've heard how he encouraged them to recognize the signs of the times, to be wise about how hard life in this world can be. I think he would urge us to be wise like that as well.

What this passage *doesn't do* is tell us how to live in the light of these things. For that, we must look at the rest of Jesus' teaching. Here are the kinds of things he taught about how to behave in the midst of a violent and conflict-filled world:

- "Blessed are the merciful," in a world like this
- "Blessed are the peacemakers," in a world like this
- In a world like this, "love your enemies"
- In a world like this, "pray for those who persecute you"
- In a world like this, "take food and drink to the hungry and thirsty and clothe the naked"
- And, welcome the stranger
- And, visit the sick and those who are in prison

In a violent and suffering world, the duty of the faithful is to practise sacrificial love. Just like Jesus did. Acts of love and compassion in a world of trouble and violence can begin to mend the torn and tattered places.

The book of James in the New Testament says that true religion involves caring for the orphans, the widows — the neediest and most

vulnerable people among us — and keeping ourselves unstained by the world — that is, by keeping ourselves from becoming violent and divisive and caught up in the conflicts that keep our world from being at peace.

God's design for this world is shalom. And his design for us is that we be people of love, people of *shalom*, people who bring *shalom* to others. In a world of violence and conflict, Jesus calls us to follow him right into this world, announcing his peace and working toward it through acts of sacrificial love.