

St James's Piccadilly  
Trinity 9 – 14 August 2022  
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READINGS –

**Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2**

**Luke 12: 49-56**

This morning's Gospel gives us 'scorching heat' in more ways than one, and perhaps this seems apt for a day when it's so hot that it's safer to be inside the church rather than outside. Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel are dramatic, stark, and they make for confrontational and even painful reading. Does God expect and even intend family conflict? Is division inevitable? Perhaps Jesus is naming deep conflicts that already exist, and explaining that his message is so radical that it could cause immense conflict. It's not what Jesus wants, but it is likely because of the power of who and what he is, and what he says and does.

We know just how divided things will get during his lifetime, and how the painful divisions amongst people at every level, from personal to international, continue to wound the world so sharply. Many who heard Christ's message didn't merely reject it – they killed the messenger.

In this passage, Jesus is not announcing a future problem however, he's proclaiming a present fact and a tragic reality of the human condition in raw and revolutionary terms. He has no delusions about his present or future popularity. He has work to do, and the work – like our work – will be costly. It is the work of love in a place and time in which walking life's path with love alone to light the way is always a risky choice, not a romantic ideal.

The fire that Jesus brings is holy. Perhaps another way of describing 'peace' in the way that Jesus uses it here – when he says he hasn't come to bring peace but division – is complacency. He has come not to simply collude with whatever injustice and oppression continues to crush the vulnerable. He has come with fire. Calling for change, and willing to risk everything to bring about that change. Not everyone will be able to handle that. Jesus is telling it like it is. As the Black American theologian James Cone put it, 'There can be no reconciliation with God unless the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and justice is given to the poor.' Cone says that a 'sanctified person' is the 'one who knows that their freedom is inseparable from liberation.'

Holding Christ's wild words alongside the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews creates further questions. We're presented with a list of figures in the Hebrew Bible who trusted in God and experienced liberation and sacred solidarity in circumstances of extreme danger. The Israelites in the wilderness, the pain of rejection, the horror of torture. It's a list that is deliberately as brutal as it is triumphant. It's vital to say that it is not supercessionist and must not be read that way. The possibility of antisemitic interpretation here is a serious and

dangerous one. It is a terrible misreading to interpret this text as an assertion that these people in the Hebrew Bible – God’s holy people – did not have access to God’s love in the way that followers of Christ are offered God’s love. God’s love is shown to God’s people in every age, again and again.

A way of contending with the words that the Hebrews reading gives us, is to see it as an invitation to continue walking with God by responding to the message Jesus offers. There is an invitation to explore what God is doing, and how. It is, in the presence of Jesus as God’s Son, an invitation to explore the unimaginable unconditional embrace of God through the incarnation – God made human, God with us as a human being. The God of the Hebrew Bible is the God of the New Testament – our Gospels and epistles – and in Jesus, for those who choose to follow him as Christians, the story continues in a specific and inspiring way. God is at work, just as God has been at work. And the God who is at work is the one who speaks to us in Jesus’ words this morning when Jesus speaks so frankly about the reality of division and the pain that this causes. He comes to offer unity. The alternative is a painful and oppressive cruelty with which people – in families and between nations – continue to treat each other. We were made for love. And, truly, not for anything else. That’s the beauty and the risk of God’s creation.

Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States, describes Christianity like this: ‘I really do believe we need to see ourselves as a movement – a Jesus movement – rather than as an institution. That’s what Jesus was about. He inaugurated a movement to make God’s dream happen. To see ourselves this way changes everything. It means our institutional configurations must be designed to serve the movement and not the other way around. The movement serves life.’

At St James’s I can see this movement that serves life. It is everywhere. In the liturgy, the conversations, the questions, the hopes, the dreams, and the sorrows too. It’s in the moments of deep honesty and unvarnished reality. I’ve been here with you for three whole weeks. And I can see this movement here, and I’m proud to be part of it.

When Christopher Wren described this church he explained what made it unique: It can ‘hold 2000 persons and to all hear the service and see the preacher. I endeavoured to effect this in building the Parish Church of St James’s, Westminster, which I presume is the most capacious, with those qualifications, that hath yet been built.’ Apparently our current capacity is nearer 500 for various reasons, but 2000 is what Wren planned for and anticipated. As one of the people on a recent Wren project tour of the church with Lucy remarked, maybe people were smaller in the 17<sup>th</sup> century?

With this vision of people gathered together in large numbers in this beautiful building, with its clear glass and serene interior, I’ve been thinking a lot about sacred space in relation to the idea of following the light. On Tuesday evenings for the weekly Sanctuary Eucharist, this altar is covered in candles. It’s beautiful. To me, they represent a community and its prayers, gathered in hope, clustering close to the broken-hearted beauty of Jesus in Communion.

Capaciousness, ample space for all, is a beautiful quality. Our Eucharist is capacious and abundant, here in the building, with our online global community, and in our hearts. We’re

open to the world and open to God, as best we can, knowing there is always more to experience and more room to grow.

As the Smiths sang – ‘there is a light that never goes out’

As John’s Gospel proclaims in its opening words, (and this is the King James Version, which Wren would have known very well: ‘And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.’

Each morning I commute here on the Piccadilly Line, in anticipation of starting the day with prayer in this church, in the side chapel every morning at 8.30. If you’ve not been here for these quiet morning services and you can make it sometime, I warmly recommend it. There are few better ways to start the day, than by renewing our commitment to be anchored in God’s love.

On Wednesday morning, I noticed a poem by Lemn Sissay on the tube, which is part of the Poems on the Underground TFL series. It’s called ‘Dei Miracole’ which is Latin for ‘a miracle of God’ –

*The Spirit of structure can’t be foreseen,*

*For somewhere between*

*The architecture and the dream*

*More than the sum of its parts*

*Somehow, somewhere, the heart.*

I love the way this poem resonates with Michael Curry’s ideas about what he calls the Jesus Movement. It is the movement that is life-giving. Buildings like this incredible space to which so many thousands of people are drawn – and not just because of Bridgerton! – buildings like this speak about the promise of love in a world where division is too often the norm. The buildings speak that language of love only because the people within them – us, walking step by step in faith and curiosity and hope together, and the generations before us – are willing to learn that language and teach its vocabulary to others. Christopher Wren was certain that this place could fit 2000 people. Whether or not that’s true today, it is most certainly a place for growth. Because the church is more than the sum of its parts. It is a place to discover how much more we can be, with the Eucharist as God’s feast for us at the heart of it all. Amen.