

Sunday 18th August 2019
Trinity 9 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Jeremiah 23.23-29
NT: Hebrews 11.29-12.2
G: Luke 12.49-56

I love Bible passages such as the one we heard in today's Gospel. We spend so much time trying to make Church accessible and friendly to people, and then we invite everyone in and read them a dismal passage about conflict. It is a rather alarming and frantic gospel, Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" The whole of the Gospel passage is about conflict, and about everything being churned up when people are confronted with the truth of Jesus and the choice which they have to make. Well, don't come to Church to relax, is all I'd say.

This would be an easy passage to speak about if we made it all about the current political traumas, or about tension in the Middle East, or some other news headline, but that would be both cheap, and also to ignore the wider narrative that – despite what newspaper headlines might make you think – we do not live in unusual times at the moment. It is a permanent reality that the world is in conflict, and the nature of our existence is that something peaceful can quickly be recalculated into something violent. As our organist has pointed out to me, even "Schubert" can be rearranged into the word "butchers".

One of the traumas of living with conflict is that it becomes normalized. In fact, this is the danger of all that we detect to be wrong with the world, but we only react against it when we see it as an extreme. Some of you may have picked up on the words of an American congressman this week whose language seemed to normalize rape and incest. It was a

shocking thing to say, and I don't agree with what he said, but the most abhorrent part of this was his attempt to normalize what should not be normalized. Awful things happen every day in every part of the world, but that does not mean such things should be considered 'normal'. And it is the conflation of the words 'usual', 'frequent' and 'normal' which we need to resist in today's Gospel. And this is what Jesus is saying: when he speaks of the divisions which are coming, of father against son, and mother against daughter and so on, he cannot be hiding the fact that these are the divisions which we already see in our lives – even if you have not taken as many funerals as I have, then you will still know that irreparable schisms are laid bare when families are brought together. This is frequent and it is usual, but is it normal?

This Gospel is, of course, part of an apocalyptic vision of the end-time, and so Jesus' message is that the world changes, and the end of the world is approaching, not when the traumatic events occur, but when they become normal. Jesus says, "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" It is that reflection on the present time which Christians are called to do every day.

Commentary is not just something for the newspapers, because participation in the world is something to which we are called at our baptism. In today's Gospel Jesus says, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized." As we receive the gift of grace at baptism we are not set apart from the world, but we are placed in it. One of the prayers which the Church provides for a baptism service begins: "God of grace and life, in your love you have given us a place among your people." That is not to say that God's people are separate from others, but rather that we are placed amongst all God's creation.

Followers of Christ in the midst of everyone, and the commentary on the present time comes from followers and those who do not follow. What can be difficult is discerning who the followers of Christ are, because sometimes those who follow most avidly are those who have not yet called him by name. But as we hear the commentary around us, we must also make the commentary ourselves. As it said in our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

So our calling as Christians is to be participants rather than observers. To provide a commentary on the world, rather than to hold ourselves apart. This is my critique of social media, that it creates observers rather than participants, and the commentary which social media provides is largely that of non-participants. Through Facebook or Twitter I can know without doing, and so neither my faith nor humanity is challenged. In our first two readings we get that sense of people of faith in the midst of activity, not hiding from it. And our calling is to normalize something new. What, then, do we consider normal in our own context? Every day we encounter things which we dislike, and every day even just a scan of the day’s news can bring situations which do not seem right. And yet we also easily put them away from us. Is violent death and illness normal? I hope not. When we look on the streets around us, is homelessness normal? No, it is a challenge to society. And I could go on. When these ills become normalized, then this is when society is looking at breakdown.

As a Church, both locally and across the world, we have a calling to challenge normalization. At St Nick’s, we have particularly focused on poverty and homelessness in the last year. Our ongoing support for the Micah Foodbank is not just charity, but a critique of a society which relies on Foodbanks. The summer holidays can be difficult for families who rely on school meals and other support, and so it is particularly important that we try and donate food

more frequently throughout August. But we are also working with partners across the City to challenge homelessness. Since the Homelessness Conference which took place here in April, we have been working with colleagues to develop a Business Charter on Homelessness which will be launched this autumn. There is a tough message in this Charter as well, as we encourage people not to support street-living, but we shall be inviting businesses across the Region to challenge the normalization of homelessness. This is not something which we should accept as inevitable: homelessness should always be abnormal. The first line of the Charter begins: "We acknowledge that every individual deserves a home." This is the normalization which we seek.

If this is what we are doing as a Church, what can we do as individuals to challenge society? Challenging normalization is not about putting off the times of which Jesus speaks in the Gospel, but it is about our interpretation of the present time. Our interpretation of today should be to cling on to the fact that these times are not unusual.

"I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" Jesus' words are not a complaint about the task, but a challenge to the present. The call of the baptized is to live in the world and to offer our critique. As we witness the turmoil around us we know it is not new, but we should never accept that it is normal.

Fr Crispin Pailing