

14th August 2022

Call to Worship:

God of creation, You brought life to all that we see.
You set the boundaries of the universe and placed us within its care.

Creator God, breathe life into Your creation

Holy Spirit, You bind Your children together in community.
Your bonds transcend borders created by humankind.
You kindle the fire within us that stirs our passion for faith, justice, and reconciliation.

Spirit God, inspire us to reconcile

Jesus the Christ, You came to teach and to lead. You showed us the cost of discipleship when You stood up against the powers of the world, and they tried to suppress Your truth by sentencing You to death. Your life was more powerful than death and Your truth lives on in us.

Jesus the Christ, help us reflect Your light of truth and peace

Opening Hymn: O worship the King all glorious above WOV #67

Opening Prayers:

Let us confess our sins, for God is gracious and strong to save.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of goodness and truth, we have failed to seek after your wisdom and have followed paths that have led away from you. Forgive our foolish ways, and lead us in your truth, that we may live in the fullness of life as you intend through Christ our Lord. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Beloved, your sins are forgiven, for God is merciful and just. Therefore, be reconciled to the Lord and to one another, walking in the light of Christ.

Hymn: *Tune: O Little Town of Bethlehem (Tune: St Louis)*

O Shepherd, hear and lead your flock,
as lambs, we crave your care:
what strength on earth approaches yours,
what mercies can compare?

Restore to us a saving faith,
the radiance of your face
to lighten and reveal the gift
of your redeeming grace.

Our selfish prayers deserve your wrath,
our pride, a sudden burst;
we have but stones to serve as bread,

and tears to quell our thirst.
Restore to us a saving faith,
the radiance of your face
to lighten and reveal the gift
of your redeeming grace.

Your people, like a vine, once spread
and flourished in the land;
but now the vineyard fails,
the fruit lies withered in the sand.

Restore to us a saving faith,
the radiance of your face

to lighten and reveal the gift

of your redeeming grace.

Prayer of Illumination:

Holy God, your Word is like fire. By the power of your Spirit, illumine our sight and enflame our hearts, that we may live lives more faithful to your will.

Amen.

Scripture:

Isaiah 5:1-7

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Psalms 80:1-2, 8-19

Luke 12:49-56

Reflection:

Last week we talked about peace. World peace and inner peace, the peace that only Christ can provide. But if you were paying attention to the gospel reading for today. You may well have heard something quite different about peace. What was that?

Verse 51: Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division.

Recently I was talking with someone I was visiting and the issue of division within the church came up. They were talking at a denominational level, but division also occurs locally within congregations. The protestant arm of the church has been and continues to be beset by schism and division. It seems that whenever we can't agree about something, rather than working towards unity we seek to divide. And as a result, the kingdom of God is weakened. Locally the situation isn't altogether bad. Of note is the success of the reformed Movers and Groovers preschool music group. Run and supported by people from three of the churches. And of course, the light party which is an annual fixture that sees well over 100 Christians come together from all of the churches in Alexandria to serve and bless our communities' families.

The claim that Jesus is not to bring peace but rather division is rather unsettling. But it is but one of many unsettling phrases from Jesus' lips in our passage. We would probably all rather hear much nicer readings about Jesus than the jarring tone of judgment, and Jesus' accusation that those in the crowd are "hypocrites".

We all tend to keep away from things we believe might lead to division or might upset the happiness of a group dynamic. Even if it means that we get a less than ideal outcome. Here there is a similar tendency for us to distance ourselves from these words that to us seem shocking and more akin to the words that John the Baptist may have preached. Images of fire, baptism and

judgement don't often sit well with us. But it is important to remember that Jesus did not come to validate nor prop up the human institutions of the time, institutions that used their position of power to control and to laud over the vulnerable. Jesus came to reform and to initiate God's will. As in heaven as on earth.

We are likewise concerned at the challenge that Jesus puts for us when it comes to the expression of division that will come from families. We all probably wish that our families were more connected and more loving, that division was never to be a part of our family's history. On Friday night we were at a fundraiser for the Hansen's as they head back for another few years in Hungary. They related a story of a woman who they were helping that didn't have anyone to help her with firewood, when they visited, she was cutting up her wardrobe for firewood. Her family had deserted her once she stopped giving her money – a regular story in Hungary Alister shared.

In the first century world (whether in Jewish or Gentile realms), the household is the fundamental building block for society. Indeed, the household is regarded as a microcosm of social reality. By claiming to bring not peace but division and then illustrating such divisions in terms of the household, our reading declares that Jesus' missional purpose is not the affirmation of the current social status quo but means its complete obliteration.

This imagery of household divisions carries with it the notion of the complete collapse of current structures of power and control. The divisions depicted are generational, so that no longer will one's identity, vocation, allegiance, and status automatically be predetermined by family ties. Instead, these will be determined by one's positive or negative stance toward Jesus.

The divinely wrought peace that Jesus inaugurates and bestows involves the establishment of proper relationships of mercy, compassion, and justice between God and humanity. Not everyone, however, wants or welcomes this divine peace plan. Hence the initiation of Jesus' peace agenda also triggers contentious disunity and fissures among all facets of society, right down to the societal core of the household. The fact that such divisions include both men and women reinforce Luke's understanding that both men and women will respond either positively or negatively to God's agenda initiated in Jesus' mission and extended through the mission of the disciples. This focus on both male and females, is also contrary to the society norms whereby the male of the household would determine the family's religiosity.

The harsh sayings and indictments resounding in this text remind us that Jesus has not come to validate the social realities and values we have constructed. Such social realities and values have a propensity to seek a harmony that favours those who hold positions of power at the expense of those who are powerless and expendable. Jesus' missional agenda of compassion, mercy, and justice shatters such a status quo. This is a missional agenda that compels him toward his divine destiny to be accomplished in his death and resurrection. It is the agenda that will result in divisions and contentions on all levels of society, as people are either embraced or repelled by what God is doing through Jesus. It is the agenda that we are called to recognize in the present in anticipation of God's future. It is the agenda that causes us to reinterpret what God is truly about in the person of Jesus, and so to reinterpret who we are and what we are about as disciples of Jesus.

As the Prince of Peace Christ's life work was to model to the world how it truly should be and to conquer the powers that keep it from so being. At his return, Christ will bring an end to all divisions, but until then, he wields the sword that calls for our repentance: for demanding false peace, for believing "war" and its methods are justified by our own definitions of peace, for defining peace by our own design rather than God's loving hope.

Until then, Christ stands with his people, and sometimes he draws the division lines. But often, those lines are not the boundaries we imagine.

By Jesus sharing kingdom values he was creating division, division from those in power to the world that they had created.

Jesus drew a dividing line in the sand when the group of men brought a woman alone with charges of adultery. Jesus spoke a division when he said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan" at the suggestion that he choose a path of "victory" rather than suffering. Jesus described a division of righteousness when he told the story about an unclean outsider who risked his own life for a Jewish man who laid dying on the side of the road. Jesus caused division when he called persecuting Saul to become the Apostle Paul. Division isn't always a bad thing, sometimes it brings a better way of being. Sometimes the division causes us to check our own standing in the world, the power that we might hold at the expense of others. God brings division to our very hearts, freeing us from slavery to sin, enabling new life in step with the Spirit.

Hymn:

We do not hope to ease our minds
By shifted answers, shifted blame,

While Christ is homeless, hungry, poor,
And we are rich who bear his name.

As long as justice is a dream
And human dignity denied,
We stand with Christ; disturb us still
Till every need is satisfied.

We cannot ask to live at peace
In comfort and security
While Christ is tried in Pilate's hall
And drags his cross to Calvary.
As long as hatred stifles truth
And freedom is betrayed by fear,

We stand with Christ; give us no peace
Till his peace reigns in triumph here.

We will not pray to be preserved
From any depth of agony
While Christ's despairing cry rings out:
God, why have you abandoned me?
As long as we have hope to share
Of life renewed beyond the pain,
We stand with Christ through all the night
Till Easter morning dawns again.

Prayers for our World:

God of the ages,
You have walked with Your people
from the moment that first we walked on the earth.
You heard our cry when we were oppressed,
gave us strength and courage when doubt and despair threatened.

The earth has been divided and brought to destruction
by human fear, greed and the lust for power.

We, Your people, turn to You,
knowing that only in You can we flourish and grow.

Where division has given rise to distrust,
build bridges of understanding.

Where greed pollutes and threatens life,
open hearts to share and build in partnership.

God of the present moment,
Your love does not stop at borders.
Your grace is given freely to those who
are willing to hear and to trust.

The people of Korea have lived too long
divided and fearful for the future.

Grant them the courage to believe
that their cry has been heard.

Where nuclear weapons have been used
to threaten and keep apart,
turn swords into ploughshares
that people North and South may be fed and prosper.

God of all that is to be,

with people across the world
we pray for the end of war
and the dawn of a new age.

Let all that threatens the earth with destruction
be banished for ever.

Let the voice of those opposed to nuclear threat
grow in confidence and strength.

We will work together with partners across the world
until division is overcome and hostility ended.

We will walk together with You, our God,
into a future where the whole created order lives in harmony.

God of the ages, God of the present, God of all that is to be,
alone we may stumble but together we pray Your kingdom come.

Amen

Offering:

Our God, who is faithful, blesses us with an abundance of gifts. In gratitude,
let us offer all that we have and all that we are for the love of Christ, the
pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

God of the ages, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, we faithfully add
our gifts to those who have gone before us throughout the generations. Bless
these gifts that they may yield an increase for the spreading of your love in
the world. Amen.

Hymn:

Go gently, go lightly,
go safe in the Spirit,
live simply, don't carry
much more than you need:
go trusting God's goodness,
go spreading God's kindness,
stay centered on Jesus
and where he will lead.

Go singing, go bringing
the gifts of the Spirit,
go hopefully searching
for things that are true:
in living, in loving,
whatever befalls you,
God keep you, God bless you
in all that you do.

Benediction:

May Christ, the pioneer and perfecter; of our faith, grant you the
perseverance and courage to follow him in all justice, righteousness, and
peace.

Andrew Howley