

S.I.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It helps with today's Gospel lesson to know the context, so – again – in the lectionary, our passages tend to be isolated from their larger setting which makes it more difficult to understand them. So here, *the whole of Chapter 12 is a useful resource*. And what we learn in this part of Luke's account is a kind of laundry list of the various things Jesus condemns. It is pretty comprehensive: hypocrisy; blasphemy; cruelty in punishing one's servants or slaves; interpreting the Law by the letter rather than the spirit; covetousness; selfishness; putting one's faith in possessions; worshiping security and wealth over spiritual values; and denying the identity of Jesus or refusing to accept the thrust of his message.

Additionally, we have a great deal of evidence throughout Luke's gospel of his distrust and disparagement of the Pharisees and other members of the ruling class in Jerusalem for their exploitation of their countrymen and their collusion with the Roman oppressors. We also need to recall that the gospels were written for particular communities many years after the death of Jesus. Thus, in Luke's account, we can see that issues of wealth and poverty, for example, were of concern to Luke's audience and were a local point of emphasis.

So, this has everything to do with the impending crisis Jesus is warning his followers about in today's lesson. The crisis he's describing "poses a challenge to absolute loyalty." It is "a crisis of which his own fate will be the central feature." To appreciate the anger which permeates this passage, we need to see that "he is astonished and dismayed that so few of his contemporaries can see it all." Why can't they look at what's going on around them? "From the Roman occupation to the oppressive regime of Herod, from the wealthy and arrogant high priests in Jerusalem to the false agendas of the Pharisees --- and, in the middle of it all, a young prophet announcing God's kingdom and healing the sick?" It is apparent here that he is referring to "Israel....rebellious against God's plan that she should be the light of the world, and thus eager for violent uprising against Rome" and then having to deal with the dreadful consequences of their defeat in 70 A.D., the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, and the dispersal of the Jews into the far corners of the Mediterranean world.

So, what I'm saying is that we must first be able to define the crisis Jesus is referring to and locate it historically in the first third of the first century in Palestine. And the rest tends to fall into place. Although there is a clear focus here on judgment, many people find the passage uncharacteristically harsh, even violent. But I wonder how much of this derives from the translation. If you have ever tried to translate something into your own or another person's language, you will recognize the problem.

For example, "to cast fire" here can also be translated as "to cause discord and contention" which seems more in keeping with the rest of the passage. Even the term baptism can be misleading here if we do not know that the word can equally be translated as "immersion, plunging, or overwhelming"-- again, somehow more in keeping with the balance of the reading. Also, it is clear that Jesus intends baptism to be a metaphor for the cross. In the New Testament, baptism represents judgment and purification. And if we remove fire as being a punishment for human beings, we can recall that in the Old Testament, the purifying fire Jesus seems to be referencing here is most often associated with the burning away of impure religious practices. Not impure in a liturgical sense but in that they "tended to make religion a source of false comfort."

It can also be helpful to acknowledge that the divisions Jesus refers to are within families, not nations. Indeed, there are clearly issues that divide people even within the confines of close family relationships. My mother, for example, never really forgave her two brothers because their first marriages ended in divorce. Here what appears to divide the families is not so much Jesus himself, but his demand for total allegiance to his cause. Jesus is saying that the issues he is emphasizing are important enough to require a commitment to him. Those who do so, actually face persecution, even death. If one wishes to join him, the attitude toward material possessions must change. Moral responsibilities must be taken with greater seriousness. Persons who make a commitment to follow him will find that their relationships to others are affected by that high degree of loyalty.

In describing family relationships in the passage, especially that between fathers and sons, Jesus seems to be saying that conflict is natural, and the conflict between Jesus and the defenders of the old order will be "a natural consequence of his kingdom's reign against the tyranny of the established political order." The old patriarchal order, including its

association with Roman rule, will have to give way. With respect to the mother-daughter relationship, we need to recall that the Jews were a matrilineal culture at the time. Thus, Jesus may here be illustrating the kind of conflict the crisis of his reign will bring for the established *matrilineal* religion of his day --- that is, 2nd Temple Judaism. Clinging to a limiting religious heritage will not be valued in his kingdom. The bride, in another example, is a stand-in for the church. Not only will Christ's kingdom bring conflict between church and the Judaism of Jesus' day, but within the church there will be discord and division caused by the crisis of the new values of God's reign.

There is also a change of mood in the passage. What begins on a gentle note ends on a harsher one. At the beginning, Jesus talks about blessing his followers and addresses the people as "little flock." The passage ends with various descriptions of levels of judgment --- all of them forbidding. There are a couple of possible answers as to why this is true. First, it may be that by the time the gospel was written (which would have been after the defeat in the war with Rome in 70 A.D.), the young church (that is, the group for whom the gospel was written) was in a somber and despondent mood because they had been abused by leaders who had "lost their way and focus," and they had undergone persecution by the authorities and scorn from their more traditional Jewish compatriots. Also, when Jesus was addressing *the crowd*, he tended to proclaim "the good news of God's unconditional love and acceptance", whereas when he was with *the disciples*, he was "far more demanding."

To underscore the fact that we should not take this passage too literally, I should emphasize that, unfortunately, this passage has been cited to justify centuries of religious strife, intolerance, and holy war. But, as one writer puts it, he is "not preaching *jihad*, he's predicting the impact his message of love will have on our self-centered human nature." We are being warned that the world will not willingly accept the message of the Christ, in part because his words will be twisted to fit other agendas. When he says he has come to set fire to the world, it "doesn't mean he wants us to build his kingdom by fire and sword. The pitfall of reading snippets of the gospel is that we lose context. Jesus was, is and always will be the embodiment of divine love. As he tells us over and over again, his kingdom is not of this world." If he issues a call to arms, it is meant to call us to a mission of love. The conflict will be between those who accept and follow him and those who don't.

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Sources

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