

Luke 12:49-53 Who is Jesus to you?

“This morning’s sermon is one that I actually prepared a few years ago in a series that was covering hard sayings of Jesus, but it felt rather fitting for this series that we are looking at, at the moment.”

We’ve covered quite a number of hard sayings in our series, from dealing with sin and greed, to the place of the law and church discipline. And I think today’s is our last day in the series, and we’re finishing on a doozy. This hard saying is of a totally different order because it’s not just concerned with ethical or social expectations, although it certainly presents challenges there, and not just a matter of sin – but it strikes right at the heart of who Jesus is, and for some of us might completely upend who we think Jesus is.

What also makes this passage difficult is the figurative language that Jesus uses, which means we must work a little harder to get at the heart of what he’s saying.

So let me pray as we begin, and ask the Holy Spirit to...

“As we start a new year I want to ask you – who is Jesus to you?”

Do we really know who Jesus is?

For many of us, our views of Jesus are heavily influenced by the church calendar. The key celebrations of Easter and Christmas come to dominate what we know about Jesus – and rightly so, they’re significant moments in our faith.

Let me read to you a passage that we hear every Christmas, from Isaiah 9:6:

“For to us a child is born,^(A)
to us a son is given,^(B)
and the government^(C) will be on his shoulders.^(D)
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor,^(E) Mighty God,^(E)
Everlasting^(G) Father,^(H) Prince of Peace.”

And as we hear that passage and we think about who Jesus has come to be, our view of Jesus is that he’s come as a loving Lord, the ultimate ruler over all creation, bringing eternal justice and peace.

This is reinforced by what we read in Luke’s 2nd chapter, again a common Christmas reading, as the angels come to the shepherds saying:

11 Today in the town of David a Savior[Ⓜ] has been born to you; he is the Messiah,[Ⓜ] the Lord.[Ⓜ] 12 This will be a sign[Ⓜ] to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace[Ⓜ] to those on whom his favour rests.”

The gentle Jesus. The baby Jesus. The messiah Jesus is born. The message of Christmas is that our saviour and Lord has come into the world, and that he is bringing peace. In Silent Night we sing ‘sleep in heavenly peace’. As we put decorations up in our house, on the tree, send out decorative Christmas cards, our mantles and bookshelves are adorned with Christmas words like ‘Noel’, ‘Joy’, ‘Hope’ and ... ‘Peace’.

Peace is a deeply Christian word.

Ask your average western person over 30 whether Jesus’ message was about peace and love, and if they had any interest in answering at all they’d probably say ‘yes’. Peace is seared into our minds by the celebrations we hold.

And yet. In today’s passage, Jesus says:

“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.”

This isn’t the sort of thing you expect to hear a fortnight after Christmas. What on earth is going on?

I’m sure that Jesus’ first listeners were just as taken aback as we are. Maybe we’ve got the wrong end of the stick. Maybe we’ve misunderstood Jesus entirely...

Division

The division that Jesus is talking about, as I said in my introduction, strikes right at the heart of who Jesus is.

Across the gospels, Jesus is so often calling into question the character and judgement of the Jewish rulers, the scribes, the pharisees, and is presenting a whole new interpretation on Jewish law, on social etiquette, spiritual cleanliness, greed and adultery. He ruffles quite a few feathers.

But nothing is more challenging to the status quo than what Jesus says about himself. Ultimately Jesus is quite the divisive character because what he claims demands a response. Is Jesus the Son of God, the promised messiah, or not? Does Jesus have the authority to forgive sins, or not? Is Jesus the eternal and divine word who was before Abraham, or not?

The person of Jesus presents a very real crisis for Israel's inhabitants – because if what Jesus says is true, then this changes absolutely everything. It means the end of spiritual and national oppression, it means coming justice, it means freedom from religious sacrifices, it means the end of their temple worship. This makes Jesus a very dangerous man.

And so right from the earliest chapters of Jesus' ministry, we see the pharisees and teachers of the law plotting to kill him, and we see a collection of devoted followers eager to receive from him. God's people are already divided. Some say that Jesus' miracles are works of the devil, and others marvel and praise God for what Jesus has achieved.

And as Jesus' ministry progresses, his teaching becomes more pointed. There is no lukewarm approach to this dilemma. For the rich young ruler, he's to sell all he owns and follow Jesus if he wants to inherit eternal life. Zacchaeus needs to give up his life of luxury and repay all his stolen money to follow Jesus. Jesus' disciples need to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

So, who are they going to follow? Will they maintain the status quo, stick with the social hierarchy, and listen to the pharisees and teachers of the law – or will they side with the radical man from Nazareth?

Jesus divides the nation because he demands absolute loyalty, and a commitment to believing what he says about himself.

Of course, this isn't just a challenge for Israel. We live in a world with just as many demands for our time, our energy, our focus – our loyalty. Jesus is just as dangerous a proposition for the 21st century Australian as he was to the first century Jew. The claims of Jesus demand a response because they are quite literally a matter of eternal life and eternal death.

Jesus claims that he is the only way to eternal life. "I am **the** way, **the** truth, and **the** life" he says. There's no other option. In the economy of salvation, your good works are good for nothing. Your generosity is worthless. Your kind heartedness lacks a pulse... unless you have given over your life to trusting in Jesus. Are these good things? Of course, they are, but they can't save us. Only Jesus can do that.

Jesus brings division because there is no middle of the road option. Either you're on the wagon or you're not. As much as we try to play it down, there is an undeniable split between those who trust in Jesus for their salvation and those who don't. Inevitably those who reject Jesus as their Lord will begin to reject those who do believe in him.

And Jesus says this even demands division right to the very core of society.

"From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three."

The family unit, even this sacred bedrock will not be spared, as parents and children and spouses will be subject to division.

Jesus is saying that loyalty to him takes a higher priority even than blood relationships. It's a really confronting statement.

Now there's several things that this passage is **not** saying that I want to be clear about. Here in Luke, Jesus says he's come to bring division, elsewhere in the gospels Jesus teaches a similar thing and says he is not bringing peace but a sword. In either instance, although division and disharmony might be a result, we're not to see these passages as justification for perpetuating violence, or justification for uncharitable division. Loyalty to Jesus means holding to justice, mercy, grace and kindness, and there is no place for a Christian to use scripture for evil.

This passage also isn't saying that Jesus perversely desires division in and of itself, or that peace isn't a value that Jesus teaches. Rather, it's saying that some things – eternal things – are more important than temporal peace between people. Neither is it that believing the gospel requires division – but that inevitably as some trust in Jesus, there will be divisions.

Finally, this passage isn't setting forth a moral position, where a person split from their family, or ostracised from their community because of their faith is more moral or a better believer. Although division is expected, we can't celebrate it, it ought to be grieved. There's a lost human being on the other side of that divide, and the call of the gospel is to reach out to desire to bridge the gap with the truth, that they might repent and believe.

So, given all this, how are we to understand Jesus as both peace come into the world, and the one who brings division? Ultimately the goal of Jesus' ministry is to bring about peace between the creation and its creator. Jesus' work on the cross opened the way for us as broken sinful humanity to have peace with God.

This is the foundation on which all other forms of peace and love will stand.

Jesus brings fire

I want to bring us back to that question – do we really know who Jesus is? – because this Luke passage gives us a rare insight into the emotional life of Jesus, and we might be surprised at what we see.

Verses 49 and 50 read:

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!”

This is such a window into Jesus' mind as he considers the work that he's come to do – he says “I **wish** it were already kindled” – Jesus wants to see the outworking of his ministry come to fruition

“I have a baptism to undergo” – this isn't a baptism of water, but a baptism of drowning in the depths of human depravity to the point of his own death. There's dread here.

“what constraint I'm under” – constraint doesn't really help convey the meaning here, this is a word that means deeply conflicted or distressed, Jesus is feeling *burdened* as he waits.

And what is Jesus burdened for? What does he wish for? What is eating him up inside? It's the fire that he has come to cast on the earth.

Again, coming out of a season of joy and kindness, how do we make sense of *this*? Jesus, the one who shows mercy to prostitutes and tax collectors, who frees the demon possessed and the disabled, who feeds the hungry, is also longing to bring fire on the earth, and he wishes it was already alight. How do we wrestle with a Jesus who says, "I can't wait?"

Well, when I first preached this sermon in 2022, this was a snap shot of the news for that week: Firstly, a US star of a Christian reality show had finally been sentenced to 12 years in prison for sexually exploiting children, and abusing his siblings.

Saturday of the same week, Ukrainian forces had to retreat from their last pocket of Luhansk, as its powerful neighbour gained some ground in the now 11 month war that has been a devastating act of ego and paranoia.

Tuesday of the same week, an 18-year-old named Salvador Ramos entered Robb elementary school in Texas and murdered nineteen 4th graders, two teachers and injured seventeen others in a horrifying reminder of the reality that our world is dripping with an overflow of injustice.

When we hear these horrors, we echo the final words of the book of Revelation 'Maranatha' – Come, Lord Jesus. Come Jesus and end our present suffering and usher in your eternal glory and rule. And as we do that, we are calling for Jesus to execute the final judgement.

Tim Keller says that "anyone who is thoughtful yearns for judgement" anyone who is thoughtful yearns for judgement.

As Jesus looks out at this world that so desperately needs his act of sacrifice, he desires justice. He longs for wrongs to be righted. For evil to be restrained. He's carrying the world's despair on his shoulders knowing that soon all our selfish muck and dirt, our cruel stains and arrogant blemishes will be added along with it, and he'll go to the cross, to experience the full weight of this judgement.

Some say the fire in this passage isn't judgement, rather it's the sending of the Spirit. As Jesus' ministry begins before he is baptised by John in Luke chapter 3, John prophesies about Jesus, saying "He will baptise you with Spirit and with fire." But the very next verse says "His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

As we look at the use of fire as a metaphor across scripture, there's examples of God's guiding presence being manifest in fire, but overwhelmingly fire represents judgement. Isaiah 66 speaks of Jesus coming with fire. 2 Thessalonians speaks of Jesus revealed in blazing fire.

Up until this point in Luke 12, Jesus has been giving warnings about readiness, commitment to God's purposes, setting our hearts on heavenly things. Jesus has the new covenant and the end times in view. And in the passage after ours Jesus chastises the people for being able to expertly read the weather, and yet can't see the coming wrath of God. This fire that Jesus longs to pour out on the earth is almost certainly judgement. But it's more than that.

What Jesus longs for isn't to see the world burn to the ground – this is contrary to everything he says about God's care and sustaining of the world, and contrary to the hopeful message of the gospel to bring freedom and life and hope. If God wanted to put a stop to the world, he just needs to withhold his power and it'll be done.

Fire brings judgement, and justice. But fire also brings refinement. Judgement is a means of justice, but it's also a means of cleansing. Fire cleanses lasting things. We don't use fire to change our bedsheets, or to tidy our end of financial year clutter of receipts. Well at least I don't. Those things wear out or become irrelevant in time. But we do use fire to refine precious things.

We cleanse metal with fire – it's brutal, and ridiculously hot – it's severe but that's what it takes. Severe but wonderful because what we're left with at the end is pure, lasting, and precious. All the dross and impurities are burned up.

If that's what is needed to cleanse precious metals, what does it take to cleanse humanity? to cleanse creation?

Jesus was longing to see this purifying fire restore that which he loved, to judge sinfulness, to restore justice, and usher in the new creation. But he knew that this could only come by one way, a hard way, a severe and immeasurable way through his own death on the cross.

The message of judgement is good news for the Christian, because it has dealt with once and for all that which separates us from God. We are forgiven. We are made new. Yes, we're waiting for the last days when we will be made perfect, but through the fire of judgement we can have hope.

And yet there are those that don't see it this way. Those who can't stand for Jesus' claims to divinity, who won't trust his forgiveness, who won't submit to his Lordship. There will be justice coming for those people too, refining fire, but unless we are standing in Christ, there'll be nothing left. All that will remain is worthy of eternal judgement.

The gospel is the sweet fragrance of life to those who believe but is the stench of death to those who don't. The gospel unites us to Christ as we're purified through his baptism of death, but to those who cannot accept Jesus, it causes division fundamental social disruption.

And all of it hinges on the person of Jesus. Who is Jesus to you? Is he the one who brings justice and division, or is he the one who endures a brutal death to cleanse you, that you might be united to Christ, and to the church, forever?

As I leave you with that question, let me pray.