

## *An unreasonable and hurtful Jesus?*

*Luke 12:49-56*

The saying of Jesus reported in Luke's Gospel that he has not come to bring peace to the earth but division seems to confront us with an unreasonable and extreme Jesus! This unreasonableness is exacerbated by the statement that his work will divide families. We find this saying puzzling, if not downright offensive, because it takes aim at one of our society's last shibboleths. Moreover because this saying is so offensive there has sometimes been a tendency for preachers to avoid it and focus on what are regarded as Jesus' more 'positive' and 'uplifting' statements. I won't, however, take that path. I will confront the saying head-on and ask three questions. Why do we find the saying unreasonable and unsettling? Secondly, why on earth did Jesus say something so unreasonable or, as people would tend to say today, something so 'hurtful'? And finally we will ask whether it is at all possible that Jesus' saying can be heard as good news?

I will begin to answer the first question with two quotations from the cultural critic Terry Eagleton. The first runs: "Modern secular societies have effectively disposed of God but find it morally and politically convenient to behave as if they have not" (*Culture and the Death of God*, 157). The second goes: "Of the various artificial respirators on which God has been kept alive one of the most effective is morality" (*Culture and the Death of God*, 156). What is Eagleton getting at? Perhaps I can best interpret him by reminding you of a time in our society when what we call 'private' schools were seen to be valuable because, among other things, they taught what were called 'Christian values'. These so-called 'Christian values' were seen as important because they were thought to be an invaluable source for maintaining social cohesion and a common decency. This is to say that these 'Christian values' were seen as the glue that bound various various social groups together so that they lived in a civilised manner in the one society. Furthermore, these values were promoted because they were seen as supporting two of society's foundational institutions - government and family. Now whether values such as honesty, civic mindedness and obedience to laws were ever really peculiarly Christian is a matter for debate. The point, however, is that people did think of these qualities as 'Christian values'.

The family, as I said above, has long been regarded by many societies as an institution that binds societies together. We see this in our own national politics. Even though nearly 40% of households are single households the policies of political parties are aimed at improving the well-being of families because they are seen as the institution that gives society cohesion. Churches support this ethos, and try to increase the size of their congregations, by having what are called ‘family services’. I have also known people who said to me in that “the family is everything.” To such people, and to our society in general, the saying of Jesus that his action will divide families at their heart is either incomprehensible or offensive.

The fact that Jesus’ saying undermines these things that are the foundations that are believed to bind our society together is unsettling and, furthermore, can only be seen as unreasonable. Why did he say these hard things about what many people hold to be most dear? To begin with we need to remember that Jesus, according to Christianity, is the embodiment of God’s promise to Israel to bring into being not a new world, but a radically renovated creation with a new social order. Christ embodies the start of this renovation by forsaking - and this is what his death by crucifixion means - all claims to anything coming before grace. Thus at the inauguration of this new creation all humanity, as St Paul saw, has the same status - we are shorn of all claims to anything coming before grace. Our precious ‘Christian values’, our morality, by which we have defined ourselves, by which we structured the social world, by which we have constructed hierarchies of significance and importance in public life, by which we have comforted ourselves when we worry about decay and danger, are at one stroke done away with. How can people tolerate this? According to the testimony of the New Testament Jesus claims that many cannot tolerate it. Perhaps we can’t! And if people cannot tolerate it there may lurk within them a deep and sullen resentment at the doing away the edifice that human beings have constructed to give themselves meaning.

In view of the above I come to the third question. Is there any good news in this statement that predicts division and stress? As many Christians over the centuries have seen there clearly is. Those who are on the bottom of the pile because they have not been able to

give themselves a worthwhile profile suddenly find this is not a disqualifier for inclusion in the promised new creation. Those for whom families have been destructive in some way or other are inducted into a new community with Christ as its head. But is there any good news for we average 'Joes' if Christianity is not a force for social cohesion or community solidarity? If what happens in Christ, as St Paul claimed, is that the barriers we construct between us are shorn of their sacredness and, therefore, their solidity, then a new spacetime is present. What is new in this spacetime is that we become strangers to the many extraneous things in which we have invested hope. This happens even as we transit to being humanised in Christ. Thus in the exodus to being humanised by grace we are, in a painful way, divided in ourselves. Perhaps this too is something of what Jesus meant. It is what Luther meant when he said each of us is at the same justified and a sinner. The condition is bearable because the life that is, and will be, ours in Christ is well worth the discomfort.

**Ross Carter**  
**Pentecost 13, 2016**