

I come to bring fire?

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Viv Bridges* on the 18th August, at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 10.00am.

Hebrews, ch. 11, v. 29 – ch. 12, v. 2 and Luke, ch. 12, vv. 49 - 56.

WOW! From Hebrews - torture, mocking, flogging, stoning to death, being sawn in half, being killed by the sword, and from St Luke, Jesus said 'I come to bring fire, division, family divided against family'!

I remember someone once suggesting that, if we're preaching on a Sunday with very difficult readings we could just avoid them by choosing a topical subject, or by picking out one easier verse. How tempting it was to choose a few of those wonderful verses from Hebrews – 'therefore since we are surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses... let us look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith', but I don't think doing that would satisfy you – and it wouldn't satisfy me. I believe we have to tackle those hard passages – even if we don't come up with anything satisfying and have to admit that we simply 'don't understand'. This is always a very good lesson in humility.

I looked first, as usual, at the commentaries on these passages, but they weren't very helpful, so I pondered the readings as I was walking over the wonderful hills in the Peak District. It seemed to me that I had to start where I'd usually end in a sermon – in our own time and place - because it seemed to me that Christ's words were describing so clearly how things are for us today. There is so much 'of fire' (violence, cruelty), and so much division. I believe that much of this division actually comes from human beings' age-old search for the truth, for what is good as opposed to evil, and their desire to spread that truth.

The TRUTH is extremely difficult to discern. Today the tendency is to look to scientists, statisticians, who increasingly tell us that they have 'the truth' about the universe and about human life. But what one researcher tells us this week is often contradicted by another researcher next week, even though both insist they have irrefutable evidence to prove what they say. Or they tell us, after *much* research, something that is blindingly obvious:- eg 'Investigations' (???) show us that exercise and good diet are good for the body!! When I was in the Peaks there was a report in the paper that 'research shows that drinking a glass of water can help sharpen the brain – if you were thirsty in the first place, but not if you weren't'. WELL!!! Perhaps no one actually ever told them what 'being thirsty' was for. The other thing that researchers have been telling us recently is how HAPPY we are. Recently they told us in the BBC news that we can now measure happiness, and that we're happier than we ever were – it's been PROVED! This report was followed by reports on the state of our economy, the state of things in Egypt, and the weather forecast....

SO – '*the truth*' is extremely hard to discern (I think I've just proved it). But trying to discern good from evil, right from wrong, can be even harder, because it can be so subjective, it often depends which side of a fence you happen to be sitting on. However, having said that, and in spite of what I said before, I believe that we are living in an amazing age in which MANY men and women including many of those in government and authority, are *trying* to root out evil and put right some of the many things that have been evil in society. Of course the process is imperfect – it fails often – but the scandals over the press, child abuse, MPs expenses, abuses of the welfare system; reports of neglect in Care Homes & the NHS, don't mean things are worse now than they were, quite the opposite. They are bringing to light the

things that have gone on before (often with the approval of many in society). And there are increasing efforts to improve the lives of the disabled, the disadvantaged, to bring relief to many places in the world where there is poverty, and to bring peace to areas of violence and war. Jesus challenged the Jews to read the signs of the times 'to interpret the present'and I believe that we are, in fact, beginning to try to do that. There is a ground-swell to be honest about the dreadful signs that we see, to face them, and to TRY to do something about them.

But, although we would agree about the truth of most of the issues I've mentioned, there are many things about which we would disagree. Often what is 'good' for one individual is not good for another, or what is good for an individual may not be good for society. We have all heard recently of quite extraordinary rulings by courts of Human Rights, in which only the rights of the individual bringing the action seem to be considered, no one else's. And I can't help feeling sorry for members of the Police Force, the NHS, other institutions that are continually criticised for every failure – but rarely praised for the infinite number of times they get it right. But we all have different views about this ...

And, as for religion - well! We don't have to look very far to see the huge divisions about what is 'right' in our WORSHIP, in our attitude to the Bible, in our attitude to women, to homosexuals, and those different views are held by people of deep faith and sincerity. Any of these differences can divide us from each other, they can divide members of a family one from the other. So, 'being divided' and recognising there is 'fire' on our earth are things that we experience as part of our everyday lives, and they are often the result of trying to spread the truth.

As imperfect human beings it is inevitable that we shall not be able to discern absolute truth, absolute 'right', but Jesus Christ did know 'the truth', did know goodness. He was made man in order to proclaim the good news of his truth and goodness, the truth of God's love for us, and of his longing for us to respond to him with our love. But Jesus' message challenged much of what the Jewish authorities held as 'truth', and so it challenged their authority, their power and their wealth. It was inevitable, then, that what Jesus said would cause division as some people came to believe Jesus, while others didn't – often within the same family.

I don't believe that Jesus came to bring division and fire 'just for the fun of it', any more than I believe he came to die just for its own sake. I believe that division, and his suffering and death, were the inevitable consequences of the message he came to bring, a message that so many people didn't want to hear. This suffering and death were often the fate of those who did believe in the one true God of goodness and love and who devoted their lives to trying to spread his Gospel. The passage from Hebrews was a most wonderful hymn, in a way, about some of those people, and about the amazing power of FAITH.. 'By faith ... by faith ... by faith time would fail me to tell of Gideon, of Barak....' The gift of faith can inspire people to the most amazing acts of courage as they try to spread the word of God's love and are led into those places of division, of fire.

As I have hinted, I believe there are many people of great faith today – not necessarily a Christian faith, but a faith in something that is truly 'good'. Such people work tirelessly to undo evil things. But this often does cause division, it may 'bring fire'. Many of us don't have the courage to fight for what we believe (and I include myself in this). We prefer to complain to the TV, and we often prefer not to risk our relationships by openly challenging views that we believe to be untrue, or evil. I have great admiration for those people who dare to challenge, to risk division, to risk persecution in order to undo evil, because this was what

Jesus came to tell us and to show us. The *'fire'* that he came to ignite, and the division he caused were the result of the fact that so many people simply didn't want to know about God's love.

Let us give thanks for those people who have the courage to try to root out evil, selfishness, greed, from our world, who try to spread love and compassion. For, whether it is 'in God's name or not, such actions are surely his work, the work of God's Holy Spirit, his flame of fire and love.

Amen