

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 12.49-59)

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Our reading tonight consists of three little vignettes. What causes Luke to bring these sayings together in just this way I don't know, but maybe it's because the tenor of each one feels a bit ominous, apocalyptic. In the gospel, they come after an extended discourse by Jesus on the importance of keeping awake and each touches on themes of crisis, choice, and discernment. There is urgency here, and the presence of *agon*, contest.

In the first saying, Jesus proclaims his own vocation as a cause of division between people, himself as the catalyst for decisions that will pit fathers and sons, mothers and daughters against each other. He picks up the language of the prophet Micah, who laments that a corrupt people turn against each other and fail to recognise the one who remains faithful. The second saying elaborates on this theme, and Jesus castigates the crowds for being able to recognise the patterns of the weather, but not the reality of the present time including (perhaps) his meaning as the presence of God's judgement among them. The third saying feels harder to place but at least one aspect of it continues this theme of discernment and decision – 'why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?' Why do you give yourself to the judgement of a magistrate who, for all you know, is going to find against you and for your accuser? Why do you not take responsibility for yourself, and so acknowledge your need to take responsibility for your relationship with others? All in all, a pretty confronting set of sayings.

They raise the question of how to live and involve a call to be rightly related to one another and to God. They all suggest that, mostly, we do not know how to do that – the crowds don't recognise what Jesus is about, they can't read the signs aright, and they can't even manage their own lives very effectively. For this reason, these sayings also suggest, as do the passages that precede them on 'watchfulness' that the advent and presence of God among his people occurs as disruption, discontinuity, division. It will not be easy to recognise; it will call for some kind of radical shift. These are themes familiar to us from the very beginning of the gospel story – with Jesus' calling of the disciples involving a radical break with their past lives – to the very end – with the appearance of the risen Christ met largely with non-recognition and incomprehension. The living God is (at least at one level) a stranger and if we want to know and discern God, then we too must become in some sense strangers to ourselves and our communities – drawn outside easy forms of belonging and old ways of perceiving.

This, for me, is one of the dimensions of biblical faith that authenticates it. How do we know that 'God' is not just a projection of our desire for security, a means by which we keep our group together over against other people? Partly because the living God of Israel is just as likely to lead us into radical abandonment of our attempts at security, undoing our belonging unproblematically to our culture or, indeed, our church. Though notice also that this insight itself is corrupted if it becomes a program – as if the mere fact of feeling persecuted or misunderstood or marginalised by others authenticates me and my version of 'God'. There are Christians whose self-satisfied 'persecution' complex is just as self-reinforcing and falsifying, as the unwatchfulness of those who are complacently identified with the dominant ideology. To all and to each, Jesus says 'keep awake', 'be dressed for action', for 'the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour'.

And this brings us to a key question of the human journey: what does the call to 'wake up' amount to? How do we recognise when it is *God* at work disrupting our settled lives? How do we learn to interpret the signs of the times and so relate rightly to one another in our disputes and difficulties and suffering?

These are not abstract questions. On Thursday I attended a Service of Lament for Asylum Seekers, organised by the Canberra Region Uniting Church. The liturgy made present the agony of those seeking asylum, as well as our seeming inability to have an adult political conversation about our communal response in this area. As Reverend James Haire said in his remarks, our politicians seek to deal with this 'problem' through a series of simplistic slogans, but the reality is that in the world today there are 40 million people who are 'on the move', because of war, persecution, economic hardship and climate change. That problem is not going away and will not be solved by slogans crafted for our electoral consumption. I do not suggest that there *are* easy, no cost answers to this enormous global challenge, any more than there are easy answers to climate change, or transforming economic systems, or chronic unrest in the Middle East, or indigenous community breakdown in this country. But what would 'waking up' look like? What would it mean to recognise and be responsive to the presence of God in the midst of all this chaos, and so accept responsibility for interpreting and relating in healing ways to our times?

Jesus said: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed!' The baptism of which Jesus speaks is his death – his descent into chaos and unmaking, symbolised in baptism by submergence in the watery chaos of the time pre-creation. *And* the baptism of which he speaks is his rising again to life, the first fruit of the new creation through the Spirit, revealing that no matter what kind of death and destruction we human beings wield, God's love and life cannot ultimately be overcome.

To choose to live as if this is true puts us at odds with the way the world usually runs – where those who wield death get to say what happens, and the rest of us scramble to stay on the right side of power or at least out of trouble. That is why Jesus brings not peace but division, with even members of one family divided over how to live. And to live as if this is true also gives us clues about how to discern our times and our response. For one thing, if Jesus, the victim of human violence, is God’s judgement, the purifying fire that tests true metal, then it can never be of God to secure our lives by making victims. Jesus is always on the victim’s side, the one who is naked and a stranger, hungry and in prison. Jesus is on the leaky boats and in the detention centre with those who are desperate and frightened, *and* Jesus is in the immigration office when those who work there are self-righteously judged by those of us who do not have to ‘dirty our hands’. We are all at different times victims and persecutors. To undergo the fire that Jesus brings to the earth, means to recognise our persecuting, death-dealing propensities, however they are directed or justified, and to come vulnerably into solidarity with all.

Furthermore, if God’s new life emerges from the watery chaos of death and unmaking, then we need not be afraid of confessing our confusion, acknowledging that we are overwhelmed, afraid, dwarfed by what we cannot control or solve. The beginnings of true discernment lie always in the darkness of unknowing, in humility, listening and obedience. And, in policy terms on a whole range of issues, this might show up as the willingness to confess that we do not know what to do, to engage humbly in authentic conversation, to hold paradox and lead others in the practice of patience, and the trialling of ways forward without rushing mercilessly to condemnation.

To become more capable of holding complexity in this patient, open-hearted way, is a spiritual work. It asks for the courage to be vulnerable, to risk being

misunderstood and getting it wrong, to learn compassion for myself and for everyone else. It asks us to share in Jesus' baptism, the unmaking of the self-sufficient self with its accompanying defences and blindspots, to offer my life handed over to receive myself back in the Spirit and to give myself to share in God's love for the world. My prayer is that this is the work we undertake together, so that we (with Christ) may be catalysts enabling the choice of love over death in our times.