

Hinde Street Methodist Church

18 August 2019 10.00am and 11.00am

Rev Peter Cornick

Fire and division! God's presence: God's call

Jeremiah 23: 23-29

Luke 12: 49-56

Introduction: faith and activism

What is it like to be a Methodist minister? Over the last year, a number of ministers, both Presbyters and Deacons, have made videos, to try and capture the infinite variety of God's call and work. These are some words in one video, from a Presbyter called Dan Woodhouse.

I feel like I grew in my faith and then in my calling into ministry, whilst also growing into activism. I've taken direct action on a few occasions – the second time I was arrested was for breaking into BEA Systems at Warton in Lancashire where they were building planes for the Saudi air force which would be committing war crimes in Yemen. Twice I've been arrested for doing this and ... twice I've been acquitted, which shows ... there's justice to be found in our society and we've got to remember that Jesus was arrested and crucified not for just saying a few nice things but actually challenging the unjust powers that he saw in the world that he was in.¹

I heard Mr Woodhouse speak last year; I remember how surprised he was that he got within feet of the aircraft – before being stopped. I admire his courage; his conviction; his faith. Jesus says that he brings not peace, but division – which shocks us. Mr Woodhouse was trying to bring about peace by stopping planes flying. Yet to do so, he caused division – no doubt in his church, perhaps in his family, and within the law. What to do with someone who causes division in the course of peace? Perhaps, as Jesus says, Mr Woodhouse was bringing a certain fire to his Christianity; did he, as Wesley wrote:

guard the holy fire,
and still stir up thy gift in me –
ready for all thy perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat.²

The videos of different Methodist ministers describing God's call and work, reassure me: when it comes to feeling God's presence or hearing God's call, we don't all have to feel, or hear, the same!

Jesus: a challenge to our pre-conceptions

Jesus, in this passage from Luke, does challenge our complacency; challenges our pre-conceptions of who he is. This passage makes for uncomfortable reading – Jesus is one bringing fire and division.

The image of fire here, is not a cosy and welcoming hearth in winter, but an image of fire which ignites, spreads, and, like a forest fire, changes a landscape.

The Jesus of our imagination is one who brings peace, harmony and reconciliation; from the images we retain from childhood to the Christmas cards we still send. Jesus' final conflict

¹ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-ministers-and-office-holders/ministry/called-to-ordained-ministry/the-call-to-ordained-ministry-my-story/become-a-minister-that-s-the-worst-thing-that-could-happen/>

² Singing the Faith 564, Charles Wesley

with Pilate is, of course, famous for his 'passion' – his willingness to let this suffering happen to him. He demonstrates peace; non-violence. Even Jesus' frequent conflicts with the Pharisees over the interpretation of the Law, are couched in parables and wise sayings; there is a respectable debating procedure, familiar to the Rabbis. Peace is what we associate with Jesus.

So, these words in Luke, are, I think, particularly hard for us to hear.

I came to bring fire to the earth

*Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*³

What was it the peace activist minister said: 'Jesus was arrested and crucified not for just saying a few nice things but actually challenging the unjust powers that he saw in the world that he was in.'⁴

Listening to Christians from Hong Kong at the moment, I hear of those who are trying to bring about political change – challenging what they see as unjust powers. Of Methodist churches who have opened their doors to protestors – and have been surrounded by riot police. Of people being bullied on social media for supporting the protestors. Yet, within the Christian community, there is uncertainty as to how to respond. We are asked to pray for Hong Kong, and its people: but do we pray for peace, or do we pray for division – and will division bring about peace?

Jesus, in this hard-hitting passage, says:

You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

With the uncomfortable words of fire and division, and this accusation of failing to notice the needs of the Kingdom, this passage reaches to the heart of the gospel. What is it like to feel God's presence; what is it like to hear God's call? Both the activist minister, and the Hong Kong Christians, are trying to interpret the times and respond accordingly.

The message I hear Jesus telling us is, if we take our Christianity seriously, there may come a time when we too have to decide whether we are baptized into fire and bring division in order to gain peace.

Fire:

Fire is a feature of the Biblical story. Whilst I have been following the idea that fire brings about action, change, Kingdom – here are three examples which suggest something more subtle:

- Moses encounters the breath-taking presence of God, on Mount Sinai. God speaks from a bush that is on fire, yet, is not consumed. And from the fire, God appears to Moses, to be close; to be present; to be speaking to Moses – and not just speaking, but calling him to lead the people out of slavery (Exodus 3:2). It is the fire during the night, which marks God's presence as Moses leads the people in the wilderness (Exodus 40: 38).
- Elijah, faced with the prophets of Baal, wanted to show that the God of Israel, alone was God. After the prophets of Baal failed to communicate with their god, the God of Israel 'sent down fire' (1 Kings 18.38).

³ Luke 12: 49-51

⁴ Ibid

- Jeremiah referred to these false prophets as he criticised false prophets of his day:
 - They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal.
- Much later, the prophet Daniel's three companions, are sentenced to be burnt by Nebuchadnezzar for worshipping God; yet they are not consumed, and the King notices the presence of God within the fire (Daniel 3:25).

So:

- When Jesus says: 'I came to bring fire to the earth', does Jesus allude to God's close presence; God's call on disciples?
- When Jesus says: 'I came to bring fire to the earth', I wonder if Jesus remembers the times of Israel's trial: slavery and persecution, and remembers that God was close by, even in the fire at those most difficult of times? In the fire, God was always redeeming the Israelites.

This interpretation of Jesus claiming to bring fire, might seem less about the direct, wildfire approach, and more about how one feels God's presence and hears God's call.

To return to the video prepared by Mr Woodhouse, it would be unfair of me to characterise it, as all about his activism – as if he did nothing else. The majority of the video describes him attending clothing banks, Bible studies, and making relationships with the people of his town. It is a ministry I recognise well. In those far less newsworthy moments of his ministry, the ordinary trials of people, God's presence is to be found; God's call on lives heard; the fire is stirred up.

Fire, which as we know, can be warming and comforting yet also destructive and violent, is seen in the Biblical narrative to be the very presence of God; the very call of God on God's disciples:

- confused and fearful after the crucifixion and resurrection, the Disciples received the Holy Spirit:
 - 'they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there' (Acts 2:3).

Conclusion

Jesus claims to bring fire to the earth – it sounds and seems uncomfortable – but perhaps Jesus is claiming to bring God's presence to the earth; God's call to our lives. For some, sometimes, that will involve actions that divide opinion; at other times, in quiet conversation:

'See how great a flame aspires,
kindled by a spark of grace.'⁵

In the end, this is a passage which shakes us from our comfortable Christianity. It reminds us that Jesus was arrested and crucified for challenging unjust powers. But how we live out that Christianity, will depend on how we receive the fire Christ came to bring – God's presence; God's call.

Let Jeremiah have the last word, for in his criticism of the false prophets of the day, he invites us to hear how God wants us to respond to God's presence; God's call.

Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully.⁶

⁵ Singing the Faith 412, Charles Wesley

⁶ Jeremiah 23: 28