

Luke 12.49-56

Hebrews 11.29-12.2

I hope you enjoyed that gospel reading! Well, maybe not. Tom Wright describes it as “high on the list of Things We Would Rather Jesus Hadn’t Said. It’s not gentle, it’s not meek and mild; it’s not even nice. Parents and children at loggerheads, in-laws getting across one another – what can Jesus have had in mind?”

Did Jesus really set out to cause division and unrest? Or is it an inevitable result of how people react to his message? The reality of following Jesus bringing strife in relationships. We can see this more obviously in the United States at present. The podcast from the Minnesota Lutheran Seminary mentioned there being various versions of Jesus there – all at war with one another.

‘I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled’. Fire appears in other parts of Luke’s gospel as a metaphor for judgement. We can see fire representing destruction. But also as a purifying agent. Think of fire cleansing, by killing germs and getting rid of debris. Then there are the tongues of fire that appeared over the disciples at Pentecost.

Bearing that in mind, we can see Jesus’ anger not as punishing, but as a desire to see the world rectified, the world put right. A world where the love of God is reflected in us, and indeed in all people. He sees an urgency to reorder our priorities.

A quick look at the news these days will assure us that what distressed Jesus then is still very much with us today. A reordering of priorities is certainly called for.

Look at the last few verses of the gospel reading:

When you see clouds rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’, and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’, and it happens. 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?

When I read that last Sunday, it immediately reminded me of a podcast I’d listened to the day before. One of Guyon Espiner’s 30 minutes interviews, this time with Michael Oppenheimer, a climate scientist in the US. In 1969, he was about to begin doctoral studies in astrophysics, when he read in the MIT Alumni magazine a list of ten ways in

which human beings are changing the climate. He was particularly interested in how fossil fuel use could affect the greenhouse layer around the earth. He checked out the physics, and changed his research direction, going on to work in climate science. In the decades since then he, and we, have seen the increases in storms, sea level rise and the associated extremes of flooding and higher temperatures. His prescription is the need to immediately reduce our use of fossil fuels.

What struck me about that last week was how we can see these signs but not interpret them. This is not so much a political insight, though it is that. But more, I think, that we see these signs and do not act on them because it is to our disadvantage. Our priorities are our own well-being. And often that's no bad thing. But one of the problems with climate change is that what we do locally does not just affect the local area, it has a global effect. Imagine if every time we were wasteful in our use of resources, a great storm came down on us! We'd soon learn how to use resources wisely.

There was a letter in the Herald during the week about our emissions. They are miniscule on a global scale, says the writer, so 'any sacrifices we make at the altar of climate action will have no measurable effect'. He then goes on to point out how such political decisions have had a negative effect on the economy. And we need a strong economy, without meaningless impediments! (NZB 11 August 2025).

As I read that, anything we do, good or bad, will be miniscule on a global scale. So why bother? Just do what suits us best. But there's a different view. A participant on the Lutheran podcast emphasised the need to realise that Jesus is addressing us. Not that Jesus is just mad at *other* people. What do we see in the world that results from *our* actions, from *our* sin, even if not directly. What is Jesus saying to *us*?

Guyon Espiner asked Michael Oppenheimer, the climate scientist, what we individually could do. His immediate answer was that in a democracy it is to vote. That's actually a good example of what we do individually having a much wider effect. Our single vote in an election might appear insignificant, but put together with everyone else's it can make a big difference. Many years ago the Mt Eden electorate was won by a margin of 8 votes. Every vote counted! What we, individually, do is not insignificant.

Today and last Sunday we've read from Hebrews of faith in times past. Of many individuals whose faith had won God's approval. We are encouraged to put aside everything that restricts us to run the race that is set before us. To follow those individuals, and indeed Jesus, who acted in faith to bring about a better world.