

There is a kind of raw directness and intensity to Jesus' words in our gospel reading this morning.

“I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

Indeed, the translation that we heard from this morning actually dials down that intensity a bit.

In the original Greek, the literal meaning of Jesus' words are.

“I have come to *fling* fire, upon the earth!”

Words that convey a much more dramatic sense of what Jesus is about.

Jesus also speaks of the stress that he is under,

a stress that will only be relieved when he has completed his baptism.

Jesus is clearly a man with a mission.

a man driven by an all-consuming passion.

So what is Jesus about?

What is this passion that drives him?

What is this mission that has him apparently dismissing peace in favour of conflict?

Well, we know that Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God,

the coming of God's reign of justice and peace.

And we know that the kingdom of God is not some distant reality that only becomes available to us when we die.

Certainly, the fullness of the kingdom is something that is yet to come, but the point of Jesus' proclamation is that it *is* coming into this reality right now, that it is, in fact, already near to us.

Indeed, elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke we hear Jesus say,

“The kingdom is among you”(17:21).

So we get this sense that the kingdom of God is somehow visible to us right now, discernible to us in our everyday lives,

that it is, in fact, an active and dynamic power at work in the world, within and between us right now.

And that is good news!
God is at work in the world right now.

But this is what I think Jesus wants us to understand:

that where God is at work in the world, changing us, and changing our world, moving us toward God's peace and God's justice, so there will also be conflict.

Because change brings conflict.

That, I think, is a fact with which we are all well acquainted.

And that is not to say that every conflict in the world is somehow the result of God's action.

Far from it.

Much of the conflict and the violence that we see and experience in the world today is firmly rooted in historic injustices, competition for resources, and the effect of ongoing ideologies of bigotry and hate,

all of which are expressions of a world and a reality that Jesus actually came to save and redeem,

all of which are part of the old order that is slowly, perhaps, but surely giving way to the new order of God's kingdom,

The promises of God's kingdom are actually the promises of peace and justice and mercy and forgiveness,

the reconciliation of ancient enmities,

the transformation of lives of poverty and need into lives of fullness and abundance,

and the healing of our bodies and minds and spirits.

Yet, those promises also bring conflict precisely because they challenge and disturb and change the world as we know it.

Those promises of peace and justice challenge us to change the way we are in the world,

to change the way we think about and respond to others, particularly those who are different from us.

Those promises challenge us to respond with kindness and generosity rather than suspicion and fear and hostility.

Those promises also challenge our patterns of consumption,

patterns of consumption that contribute to pollution, and the destruction of our environment, as well as systemic economic inequalities.

Perhaps we are being challenged to live more simply so that others may be able to live more fully.

And perhaps the biggest challenge for us in all of this is that even though we may yearn for the changes that such challenges may bring, so we simultaneously resist those challenges and changes.

I don't think that there is any one amongst us who does not want a world of peace and justice,

where everyone has enough of what they need,

where everyone is at peace with God, with their neighbours and with themselves?

Yet many of us would probably also prefer that the immediately comfortable circumstances of our lives stay the same.

Many of us fear and resist change because it takes us away from what we know,

because it takes us into a place of uncertainty,

because it evokes the possibility of endings and death.

And we would not be alone in that fear.

You might recall the stories of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness after their release from captivity in Egypt.

They found themselves yearning for the old days of their captivity rather than looking forward to their entry into the Promised Land, because at least in those old days they know what to expect and their lives were shaped by certain rhythms of predictability, and at least they were unlikely to die of starvation and thirst in the desert!

But the thing that we need to remember in all of this, the thing that we need to take hold of again and again, is that following Jesus has always been about change and it has always been about a certain kind of dying.

Repentance is the change that is at the heart of our faith and repentance is also about a kind of death.

Jesus said,

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”.

“Let yourself be changed, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”

“Give up that way of being in the world. Die to that way of being in the world, so that you can take on this other way of being in the world, this new way of being in the world, this new way of life.

And that is also the thing that we need to remember, that all of our dying is always bringing us towards a greater experience of the life that God holds out us, the life that we see in Jesus.

Jesus made the kingdom visible to us.

He was and is an agent of change who both instigated conflict and suffered pain and death as a result of that conflict.

But God raised him to new life.

God carried him through the pain and the death into the glory of resurrection life.

And God holds that same promise out to us as well.

We too are being called through death into life.