

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 15, 2010 - Luke 12:49-53

DEAD HAND!

“I came to cast fire on the earth...do you think I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three...”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Did you catch the irony of the Gospel response today? The Gospel quoted Jesus saying: “I have come to bring fire and division to the earth.” I called that the Good News from God. You responded, saying “Praise to You, O Christ.” How can we call such a message of fire and division “good news?” Anyone who has experienced the agony of family division and disrupted relationships can hardly call that Good News. How can we praise Jesus for such a message? He continues on in the same vein, “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am until it is consummated!”

Jesus list samples of the way his ministry will disrupt all our efforts at normal proper living, households divided two against three, fathers against sons, daughter against mother and so on. God’s insistence on death-resurrection as the method of salvation will play hob with all the sensible approaches to life. People will fight rather than switch from the prudent wisdom of ordinary living to the scandal and foolishness of the crucified Messiah (I Cor 1:21-25)

The world lives under the rubric of forgiveness, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In its blind wisdom it thinks it lives by merit and reward. It likes to think that salvation is essentially a pat on the back from God, who either thinks that we are good eggs or, if he knows how rotten we are, considers our repentance sufficient to make up for our unsuitability.

In the death and resurrection of Christ it puts a couple things out to pasture that the world always feels it needs. Religion consists of all the things (believing, behaving, worshipping, sacrificing, all the human race has ever thought of that it had to do to get right with God. Christianity is the announcement of the end of religion... (that fire burns).

Christianity has only two comments to make. The first is that none of those things ever had the least chance of doing the trick. The blood of bulls and goats can never take away sins (see the Epistle to the Hebrews) and no effort of ours to keep the law of God can ever succeed. (See the Epistle to the Romans) The second is that everything religion tried and failed to do; has been done perfectly, once and for all, by Jesus in his death and resurrection, therefore the entire religion shop has been closed and boarded up. The church is not in the religion business. It never has been and never will be. The church is, instead, in the Gospel proclaiming business. It is not here to bring the world the bad news that God will think kindly of us only after we have gone through certain creedal, liturgical, and ethical wickets; it is here to bring the Good News that

“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly,” It is here in short, for no religious purpose at all, only to announce the Gospel of free grace.

Life is good. God invented it, and when it is lived according to his designs, it can be terrific. And the designs of God - the laws, physical and moral, by which life is to be governed, are nothing less than the specifications for the beauties of his creatures. Moreover even in our present world, the goodness of good living is still available to us. Christians therefore, in gratitude to God, continue to live and pursue goodness of all sorts, the pleasure of sports, the delights of the mind, the joys of mutual affection, the consolation of nature, the satisfaction of virtuous and kindly acts. No lawful action, high or low, great or small, is ever an inconsiderable thing to a Christian.

However, But, Still, Nevertheless, In spite of all that...The Gospel truth is that neither we nor the world can be saved by living well. If the human race could have straightened up its act by the simple pursuit of goodness, it would have done so long ago. We are not stupid. The world has taken a 6,000 year bath in wisdom and is just as grimy as ever.

And our own lives, for all our efforts to clean them up just get grimier and grimier. We think pure thoughts and eat wheat germ bread, but we will all die as our fathers did, not noticeably better. If we are going to wait for good living to save us, we are going to wait a long, long time. We can see the goodness and we can love it. We can love it enough to get a fair amount going for us on nice days. But we simply can't crank it up to the level needed to eliminate badness altogether.

Life, therefore, for all its goodness, the act of living, for all its lawfulness and even occasional success, cannot save. I am sorry to disappoint you, but we are back at death, faith in Jesus' death, as the only reliable guide, the only effective opposite to sin, which can play havoc with goodness and badness alike.

But let me take the edge off that by giving you an illustration of what the fire of Jesus might be like and is like in his word and presence. The temptation of course is to imagine doing nothing at all. A profound quietism, a deadly boring wait for death itself finally to turn up and end the nag. To help you get around that view, I want you to hold out the palm of your right hand and imagine that someone is placing, one after another, all sorts of good gifts in it...M and M's, weekends in Acapulco, winning the lottery, being in love, having perfect children, being wise, talented, good-looking, and besides that, humble. But now consider. There are two ways your hand can respond to those goods. You can respond to them as a live hand, seeking to hold on to whatever is in it at that particular moment, clutching it, thus closing itself to all other possible good, or it can respond as a dead hand, in which case it will perpetually lie there open to all the goods in the coming and goings of their dance.

When I talk about the dead hand, accordingly, I have not in mind the absence of interest in the dance of living, but at clutching at our partners in the dance, dancing, but not trying to stop the

dance. It's the way that I think God's life in Christ and in his Spirit, the Good News, invites us to live. Jesus obviously had an interest in life. Quite obviously he didn't count his life, either as human or divine as a thing to be grasped at. He was open at all times to what God put into his hand and he remained faithful in that openness until death, at which point God, by the power of the resurrection put the whole world in his hands.

In 1511 a Catholic Priest by the name of Antonio Montesinos preached this sermon on the island of Cuba, to the nice people, indeed to the best people of the first Spanish town in the new world. He raised a storm of protest with these brave, direct, memorable words.

“In order to make your sins against the Indians known to you I have come to this pulpit; I am the voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island, and therefore it behooves you to listen, not with careless attention, but with all your heart and sense, so that you may hear. The voice says that you are in mortal sin, that you live and die in it, for the cruelty and tyranny you use in dealing with these innocent people.

Tell me; by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged a detestable war against these people, who dwelt quietly and peacefully on their own land? Why do you keep them so oppressed and weary, not giving them enough to eat nor taking care of them in their illness? For with the excessive work you demand of them they fall ill and die, or rather you kill them with your desire to extract and acquire gold every day. And what care do you take that they should be instructed in religion? Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? Be certain that, in such a state, you can no more be saved than the Moors and the Turks. (There's fire in those words.)

In the anger directed against Father Antonio by the colonists, his monastery stood firmly behind him and permitted him to continue his preaching, warning the colonists that the friars would no more receive them for confession and absolution “than if they were highway robbers.”

Word of this went back to the King of Spain, and eventually the courageous friars were...what do you think? Commended and thanked? No! They were rebuked and silenced for their “error”. Father Antonio was recalled to Spain. Lewis Hankes (a historian) calls Montesinos’ sermon one of the great events in the spiritual history of mankind.

On many of the parables concerning the work of God, the Gospel is that of grace. There is not a single note of earning or merit, not one breath of rewarding the rewardable, correcting the correctible, or improving the improvable. There is only the saving determination of the Good Shepherd...to raise the dead. (There's fire and warmth in those words.)

This puts repentance and confession, and contrition, and absolution, and all their subjects, in a different light. Confession turns out to be something different than we thought. It is not an admission of a mistake which, thank God and our better nature, we have finally recognized and

corrected. Rather it is an admission that we are dead in our sins, and that we have no power of ourselves either to save ourselves or to convince anyone that we are worth saving. It is the recognition that our whole life is forever and finally out of our hands and that if we live again, our life will be entirely the gift of a gracious Savior.

And then in the Gospel, absolution too, becomes another matter. It is not a response to a suitably worthy confession, nor the acceptance of a reasonable apology. Absolution in Latin means not only to loosen, to free, to acquit; it means to dispose of, to complete, and to finish. When God pardons, therefore, he does not say he understands our weakness or makes allowances for our errors; rather he disposes of, finishes with, the whole of our dead life and raises us up with a new one. He drops them down the black hole of Jesus death. He forgets our sins in the darkness of the tomb. He remembers our iniquities no more in the oblivion of Jesus death. He finds us, in short, in the desert of death, not in the garden of improvement; in the power of Jesus' resurrection, he puts us on his shoulders and brings us home. (There's division in those words and fire.) Think then of our whole life in Jesus, as a dead hand operation. We don't try to grasp but we let God place what he gives us in our open hands.

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