

Wake Up! Listen Up! -- Pentecost 13

Jesus is raging today. These words from Luke don't feel much like the tender shepherd we are used to. This sounds more like an angry prophet from the Hebrew Bible, telling us about the destruction of our vineyard havens, overgrown with briars and thorns.

Jesus foretells the radical division that will take place within households because of his Word. Then he mocks his listeners, calling them hypocrites for their acute grasp of the obvious: "Looks like rain" and "Gonna be a hot one" while they meanwhile (and we?) blithely refuse to acknowledge another truth that is just as apparent: We are not listening to the cries of the poor; we're not trying very hard to change things for the better; we must step a heckuvalot livelier on the paths of righteousness, and there will not be justice or peace until we do.

If you ever have the delightful pleasure of visiting the Western Isles of Scotland, you will be amazed at the sky. A continuous progression of tall cloudbanks scud by, mixing with silvery sunshine as they pass; no two minutes have the same sky. In the Hebrides, predicting the weather is pure folly for a visitor. It is almost always somehow beautiful, but you do have to be prepared to reassess your travel plans and adjust your layers of clothing by the hour.

This is the moral world Jesus is describing. There are powerful forces – of goodness and beauty, but also of selfishness, greed and violence all around us, and their arrangement changes all the time. We have to work hard to stay aware of and engaged in lives of righteousness, and not pretend that our Sunday morning prayers will carry us through

a week spent out in the ever so nautical waters, or as they call the Scottish sound, the *Minches* of our society.

As he makes his way to Calvary, Jesus utters these harsh words to the crowd of thousands he encounters. The theologian Audrey West has suggested that it might be clearer to think of these particular remarks as a description of the World after Jesus, not a prescription for any particular behavior.

After all, for thousands of years before Jesus, the prescription for a just society had already been available in Holy Scripture, but humankind failed to take the medicine. As we heard from Isaiah, God expects justice but sees bloodshed; God expects righteousness, but hears a cry. The spiritual antidote, compounded of justice, mercy and humility, is prescribed in every religion there is; the formula is older than we know.

Listen to the Psalmist today: "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the rights of the lowly and the destitute; rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked; they have neither knowledge nor understanding; they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken; and God asks: 'How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah!'"

So Jesus is not prescribing, he is describing. He tells stories of the Kingdom of Heaven and the good pleasure God takes in giving us all that our hearts can imagine or desire. The prescription is as old as the family, and Jesus, more vehement as he gets closer to the Cross, is frustrated with our human refusal to do God's will.

It is vital to remember that these are words of love. God truly intends our happiness and is in perpetual pain at the many ways we hurt. Today Jesus gives a gloves-off portrayal of what we will encounter as the World is transformed: There will be division. Based on human history, our very households will contain conflict and strife. To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly are not always what we are taught by our parents, are not always modeled by our heroes or our leaders, are not always readily available for imitation.

I recall an incident, not so long ago, when one day I needed a belt. Not in the whisky sense, mind you, but in the holding up the pants department. Now when my strapping son had started getting big, I pulled down a couple belts that were so snug on me that only in my wildest fantasies would I ever wear them again and gave them to him. I gave them to him, as in “Here, you can have these.” The other day, when I found myself in need of a belt to hold up a pair of un-snug work pants, I went and took one of those belts back and wore it on its last hole. So when young Jim went to look for that very belt to hold up his own pants, it was gone. He then came to me, pointed to my waist and said, “Hey what’s with the belt? To which I stupidly responded, “Well, it was mine to begin with.” Did I mention before that I gave him the belt? I thank God for the healthy skepticism and independent awareness (despite my best semi-conscious efforts to indoctrinate him into my personal discipleship) that led my son to offer the following response: “Uh huh, OK, Dad; whatever you say.” His meaning, however opposite to his words, was clear. I also thank God I was able to hear that unspoken meaning clearly enough to remove said belt, hand it over, and find one of my own.

Jesus is saying, ‘Don’t pretend things are good out of your own convenience. Don’t maintain habits and systems for the

sake of the traditions of those in power. Honor your elders by getting to know them well enough to decide for yourselves what to perpetuate and what to discard.' He calls us hypocrites for pretending we don't have to continually reassess and renovate our awarenesses: of language, of national interest, of domestic care for one another, of parental, religious, educational and political frailty.

The one thing Jesus can't stand is complacency. The spirit of growth is the only vital ingredient of a godly life. Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie talks about learning to write as a child, with only British books to read. All of the characters in her first stories are blonde and blue-eyed, they eat apples, play in the snow, and talk a lot about the weather. This despite that Adichie had never been outside Nigeria, where very few folks are blonde, or blue-eyed, there are no apples, or snow, and nobody talks about the weather.

If we are not vigilant, imaginative, aware and tireless, we will continually find ourselves telling a story that someone else has crafted for us, often to help them keep us under wraps and in their control, and out of their business. Jesus knows and insists that his words and his life will propel us into the telling of our own stories, into the taking of our own actions, into the living of our own lives. And many times these lives will make others – especially those with power – uncomfortable, angry, and eventually obsolete. But, like Adichie, we must persist; it is an enterprise that requires both faith and a lifetime of commitment. As the letter to the Hebrews so beautifully declares, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."