

Introduction.

What on earth is today's gospel about? I am going to read it again. Jesus is saying ***'how I long to finish up what I have been called to do. But doing so brings fire-not a literal fire but a burning within as people struggle with extremely stressful circumstances causing deep testing; it will also bring about division between people - even within families! Tragically many folk can read the weather signs but cannot read the signs of what is about to happen to them!'*** Not the most encouraging of topics!

Passages like this turn some people off from following God- others, including many church member simply ignore them. But Jesus did not say these things because he enjoyed disturbing people and cause stress and anxiety. Rather he raised these because they are central to everyone understanding what is involved in being a follower of Jesus.

Jesus in fact is challenging people's comfortable, yet erroneous, assumptions of what is involved in following him as his disciple. Following him will not bring peace on earth or even in our personal lives, rather conflict and division! He absolutely wades into family values! Families will be split down the middle he says, as family members make different choices about following him. Obviously Jesus did not have the benefit of focus groups, spin doctors and opinion polls, as modern politicians, corporations and others do.

In stark contrast to Jesus words, in our modern world, leaders and politicians (of all stripes) profess undying admiration for and support of, the nuclear family, even while they often fail to demonstrate a deep commitment to spouse and children in their personal lives!

But before we write off Jesus as a wide-eyed dreamer, a religious fundamentalist, fanatic, who has nothing relevant to say to us we need to ask the question 'what is he really getting at here?'

This passages illustrates the danger of assuming that following Jesus always necessitates our taking his words literally. There are many examples, down church history, of people assuming everything the Scriptures say must be interpreted literally and making horrible decisions as a result. Let me illustrate with two examples.

Galileo Galilei was persecuted by the church and ultimately forced to recant his scientific views regarding the Sun being at the center of our solar system and all the planets including the earth revolving around it. At his trial a text from Joshua was cited (Joshua 10:12) in which Joshua asked the Lord to cause the sun to stand still in the sky until his battle against the Amorites could be successfully

completed. Therefore it was argued, the sun normally moves around the Earth. Although Galileo recanted, truth ultimately triumphed. This whole saga caused enormous damage to the church's integrity, standing and authority and, sadly, raised doubts in the minds of many regarding the central truths of the Christian Faith.

The second example will strike us as more bizarre and tragic. Origen was a third century Christian who took Matthew 19:12 literally, where Jesus says, "**There are those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.**" He proceeded to castrate himself. Virtually all scholars understand that Jesus was here speaking of those who voluntarily choose a life of celibacy.

In fact none of Jesus first hearers would have taken his words literally and gone home and told their respective spouses and children how much they hated them, explaining that they had been instructed by Jesus to do so. Rather people would have understood him to be saying in, a memorable way, '**you cannot put your family before me. If you are really going to be my disciple then, your love and commitment to me must be greater than your love and commitment to them**'. That is a truly radical, a hard, challenging saying of Jesus. It runs utterly counter to what most of us **assume** is our God given order of priorities – first family, then others and finally self.

Now although we cannot take all of Scripture literally, as I have illustrated, that does not mean that we are free to pick and choose which bits of Scripture we will obey-rather it means that have a tremendous reverence for Scripture and its intrinsic authority, we will carefully study it to discover what it is really meaning and then responding with trust and obedience.

Many in the crowds **were** followers of Jesus- as he went from place to place they literally followed after him; but they were not necessarily his disciples. An important question for us to ponder is "**are we disciples of Jesus?**" To be a disciple, - we have to move beyond simply being part of **the crowd** (those who show up on Sundays) to being part of **the committed** (those who are dedicated to growing in their faith, serving others and conforming their priorities and lived to the teaching of Jesus).). It means loving Jesus more than anything including our families: if we do not have a family to love then our friends or significant others?

The fundamental issue that Jesus was raising was that of idolatry. The first of the Ten Commandments says:

"I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other God's but me". Ex. 20:1

Idolatry isn't limited to superstitious people kneeling before statues of animals or cavorting before trees, moon or sun. Oh no! Idolatry is an equal opportunity employer. People who claim to be spiritual and those who scorn any spiritual beliefs are equally susceptible to its clutch. Idolatry is when **anything** or **anyone**

vies for our affection for or worship of God. We can worship power, money, sex, sport, food, wine, pleasure, family or even ourselves-these are all common gods today.

There are times when my priorities are balanced-God is in first place. But then there are other times when my priorities get messed up, God effectively becomes about number 15 on my list of priorities. How can I tell? By reviewing how I am spending my time. How much time do I spend thinking about God, talking with him and serving him versus time spent cooking the perfect meal, reading the latest thriller, watching TV, planning my next stimulating vacation or whatever it might be. By asking yourself '**what are my current priorities; what is driving me?**' you can get an accurate read of the idolatry meter. Meeting regularly with a spiritual director, talking honestly with friends who are also trying to put Jesus first helps keep me on track or bring me back when I have lost my focus.

An important question for all of us to struggle with is "where is God in my order of priorities today?"

Jesus ends by saying you can read the signs about the weather-remember he was not living in Minnesota! But you can't or do not read the signs of what is about to happen to the world.

In the late 1930's, despite all the ominous signs of a furiously re-arming Germany led by a powerful, ambitious demagogue, many people in England refused to read these signs of the times. When the chickens came home to roost England was woefully unprepared for conflict and very nearly became another occupied country for the Nazis with who knows what geopolitical consequences.

What signs of the times are we not reading today? Is it the clear signs of climate change and human driven global warming? Is it the signs of the loss of any ethical compass in the West for many who are leaders in business and politics? Is it the acids of secularism eating away at our values and quality of life? Jesus is saying to us today "Read the Signs and then respond!" Amen.