

**Psalm 80: 8-19, Hebrews 11: 29-12:2 Luke 12:49-56**

The readings from Psalm 80 and Luke don't exactly warm the hearts do they? Both give the impression of being quite complex and employ dramatic visual images in order to relate their messages.

Let's start with this image of the vine in Psalm 80. A lot of careful planning, preparation, planting and patient nurturing goes into the growing of a healthy vine like this one. Such is the glorious image used by the writer of this sung prayer, Asaph, to show the commitment, love and caring God has for the people of God. Unfortunately, the people have not always responded in kind and so the vine is destroyed by the vine grower. This image is common in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah refers to the people as a vineyard, and God as the keeper of the vine, vineyards. But the vineyard, like the vine, in Psalm 80, even though it had been lovingly tended and cared for, is destroyed because the grapes produced were bad!

In Psalm 80 the future of the people will depend, not on their repentance and return to God but on God's repentance and return to them. It is God who bears the burden of human disobedience.

In this instance, Asaph, who has written many of the songs/prayers in the Psalms, their Hymnbook, has written a musical lament, song of complaint to God. It is composed of 3 stanzas each with the chorus/refrain 'make Your face shine upon us, that we might be saved'. This sung prayer for restoration was composed to be sung in the sanctuary at the Feast of Tabernacles.

This song of desperation is very real, and you can hear all of the humanity in the prayer, as he, followed by the people, call out for the saving power of God. They know that if God does not come through, they will be in serious trouble. The Psalm takes us into the distress being experienced by the Vine at what they perceive as the actions of the vine keeper. God.

"After all you have done, God, why would You break down the walls around the vineyard and allow the vine to be devoured for hadn't it flourished". Their question receives no answer and there is another renewed plea: 'Turn again, return to us' or as the phrase could be translated "Repent".

God has turned away because of the sin of the people and they are asking for God to turn back to them. Restoration is entirely

with God. To have God's hand upon them is to experience protection and deliverance. Israel, the son, the right hand, needs God. They need God's face to shine upon them. They desire restoration. In spite of the destruction, the tears and the list of woes, there is still great hope threaded throughout this Psalm, as Asaph leads the people to look forward to a great future of God honouring the promises of God.

Hope - hold that thought as we move into Luke and with its seeming theme of division. If we were to list the 10 or even 5 of the hardest sayings in the Gospels, these verses from Luke, especially the first part would make the list. The statements that Jesus came to bring fire, a distressful baptism and division - division among families are not words we want to hear. We are happier when Jesus speaks about blessed are the peacemakers. Jesus as a home breaker is not what we want to know about.

As we ponder these words, we need to place them into their larger context where the subject has been about the serious theme of accountability and judgement, and this is confirmed by the image of fire in the first words we read. There is a real sense of passion and drama around these images. Such a prophetic mission as Jesus has undertaken cannot help but provoke shock and sharp division; for the teaching of Jesus will bring acceptance by some and rejection by others.

As we ponder these words, 'But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!' it seems to be that we get a glimpse of what was happening personally for Jesus - the torment and uncertainty he must have had inside as he came to terms with the consequences of the choices he was making in following God's will which is described as having to undergo a baptism. In translating the Greek: it describes a man submerged in a grim and terrible experience. Whilst Jesus lived and died in this baptism, the disciples faced their division, their painful choices - Peter, Judas - each disciple in his and her own way as they came to terms with his death and then -- the resurrection that followed and what that meant.

The same painful choices are being made even today within families, work places, people of other faiths; even in our daily lives as we consider the decisions we have to make. These words in Luke are jolting because they make it plain there is no peace without conflict, no salvation without rejection. But, be it known

rather than being signs of defeat, rejection and conflict are incorporated into God's plan - God's right way for us - God's desire for us. "For we know that all things work together for good to them that are the called according to his purposes" Romans 8:28.

Like with the OT reading, hope is interwoven into these words of our Gospel reading becoming more pronounced as we come to this last image which is a wakeup call to prod the listeners, the readers of Luke's Gospel, and us, 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples, into a sensitivity of the presence of God in our daily experience. To emphasize this, we have the illustration of reading the weather. Now, I have to say, I don't have the experience here but back in Brisbane, I know what directions our storms come from and what wind means heat.

If, on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem they are smart enough to know that a heavy cloud in the west from the Mediterranean means rain is coming and that a strong south wind from the desert brings heat - why are they not aware that something important is taking place in their midst right this very moment. Why can they not read the signs that the Kingdom of God is near at hand, is in fact with them, in their very midst. If they accepted this, there would be true and lasting peace, hope even within the conflict.

Do we read and accept the signs of the Kingdom with us, within us, as easily as we can read the weather.

We move from one of the most difficult verses to understand to one of the most loved - the first two verses of Hebrews with its image of the cheering crowd of witnesses and the image of living the Christian faith as a race. As we contemplate living according to God's way, we are only too aware this faith journey we are on - the race - we have undertaken is at times a grim and difficult experience. It will bring division and choices we would rather avoid, close our eyes too. We balk at times to run it wanting to avoid the conflict.

I recently read about Bud Greenspan who is an Olympic documentarian. He was asked to name the greatest moment of Olympic sports. He chose the story of the Tanzanian marathon runner, John Stephen Ahkwari, at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Ahkwari finished the race approximately 1½ hours after the first place winner. During the course of the race, Ahkwari had fallen, bloodied his leg, and was limping by the end of the race. By the

time Ahkwari crossed the finish line, Olympic officials had begun to close the track in order to continue with the other track and field events. Bud asked John why he didn't just stop. John replied "You don't understand, my country did not send me 5,000 miles to start a race, they sent me to finish it."

What a great heart and understanding this marathon runner had Bud Greenspan wrote. He did not give up even with a bloodied leg and was 90 minutes behind the winner. He had been sent by his country, not just to run in the race, but to finish the race and he did so in spite of all that was against him.

For us, As Christians we are participating in a marathon that takes all of the courage, the heart, we possess. It is not an easy race; we can feel like giving up; dropping by the wayside for a long rest. But take heart from the knowledge that Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen One, has gone before and strengthens us in our run and We are being cheered on by all those who have gone before us. They, like Jesus, understand the pain, the agony, the times when we have had enough, and they cheer us on

Like with Ahkwari, perseverance is the key. We are not in this race to win but to run the course to the best we can through the strength of the Holy Spirit. We keep on keeping on by fixing our eyes upon Jesus – trusting and learning from him as we connect with him through our prayers, reading of the scriptures, worship and commitment.

And then, when the time comes, we will receive the prize of our high calling!

Let us follow in their footsteps; let us learn from their experience. Let us allow their cheers to guide us through -- to draw strength from their encouragement. Among them are people that we admire, know and love. Let us not lose hope but let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. In Him, we find the strength, the courage that we need to persevere. Feel the shine of God's face upon us.

