

# Signs of the Times

*Sermon preached on August 18th  
based on Luke 12 : 49-56*

Here's a text for our time if ever there was: 'You know how to interpret what's going on in the earth and sky - with the seasons - but you haven't a clue how to make sense of the times you're living in'.

You're right Jesus. We haven't. We don't know what to make of it all. We don't know how to interpret the times we find ourselves in. We've not a clue how it's all going to pan out.

We find ourselves amidst political upheaval - with reverberations across our communities. '5 in a household will be divided' says Jesus, '2 against 3, father against son, mother against daughter'. That sounds strangely contemporary Jesus - that could be a comment on where we find ourselves now amidst the Brexit crisis....families and communities divided. Who knows where we'll be come October 31st. We're not too good at reading the signs of the times at present are we? The political landscape is now so unpredictable with major shifts and alliances being formed and re-formed all the time.

And then there's the changing fabric of our communities - how are we to make sense of that? What sort of sign of the times is it when 3 weeks ago at the end of the service, 4 of the notices that were given out were to do with hunger - hunger right here in wealthy Stoke Newington. Penny asked for more meals to be put in our community fridge because they were going quickly; Lizzie asked for more items for the food bank, she also told us about a centre in Hackney where families who were hungry in the holidays could go for food and I gave out a notice about putting pressure on the council to fund those children whose parents had no access to public funds, to be allowed to have a free school lunch. What are we to make of this in 2019? How are we reading the signs of the times?

And then there's the wider, global climate crisis. 'Look at the sky...when you see a cloud rising in the west,' says Jesus, 'you immediately say, it is going to rain, and so it does. Or you see the south wind blowing and you say it's going to be a scorcher today and so it is'. Jesus is describing predictability and order in the natural world whereby you could read the signs - set your clock by them; you knew when to sow the seed and when to harvest it. But now? Can we have such confidence? No way! We can't any longer read the signs - freak storms and flooding, raging, soaring temperatures not known before, Alaska still reeling from wildfires, ice melting at an alarming rate in the arctic with micro plastics particles now discovered in the snow.

We don't know where we are; it's all so unpredictable, and we sense a rising anxiety and panic.

Of course at one level you might say we **can** read the signs but are refusing to do so. When it comes to the ecological crisis we have been given the facts and whilst there are those who blatantly deny them for their own purposes, we're surely all too aware of the harm that we are doing to the planet and are aware too of some of the solutions. But there's that disconnect isn't there - yes, we **can** read the signs, we can **speak** as though we believe it, but it seems we are unable to **act** as though we do.

You know how some psychologists talk of 'Post traumatic growth' to describe what can happen to someone who has had a major trauma or disaster in their life - sometimes it's as though it shakes them, wakes them up and they're able to turn their lives around and live a more engaged, deeper life; that shock to their own life becomes the catalyst for deep change. Is that the issue here? Are we yet to **feel** this trauma that the earth is experiencing? Despite all that is going on, are we still at the stage of watching from the sidelines?

An ancient Christian writer once stated that "**unawareness is the root of all evil.**" That's to say, it's not discreet acts of wrongdoing so much as the subtle unconsciousness that creates the greatest evils in the world. That refusal to sit up and take notice; that head in the sand way of being in the world.

Is that what Jesus is talking about in this gospel reading? Is he calling people into a **deeper sense of awareness**? Wake up! Look at the times you are in. See that you have new choices to make!

Jesus as we know was critical of how religious patterns and practices of his day could keep people in a state of **unawareness**: He railed against religion when it was used to insulate a person **against** God's demands, **against** God's desire to reorder all things in the ways of justice, peace and healing. In this, Jesus was of course standing in a long prophetic line - prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah (who we heard from earlier) continually chastised the people for using religion to prop up and endorse their lifestyles whilst refusing to face up to the reality of what was going on around them; refusing to face up to the consequences of their actions.

Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth. How I wish it were already kindled." You sense his urgency don't you, his passion "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, rather division." And, of course, what he's talking about here is that kind of easy peace, that superficial peace, that sort of peace that papers over the cracks while leaving disorder well below the surface.

Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "Yes, I **did** come to bring peace, but it is not of this world. My peace is not of this world." The peace Christ brings has to do with the *deep reordering of our own interior life* and the reordering of our relationships which flow from that - relationships one with another and our relationship with the earth. It is a costly and demanding peace and if we yearn for that, if we invite it into our consciousness, we'll find that we begin to move from our state of *unawareness*, we'll begin to discover connection. But we might also experience division - division within ourselves, because we'll no longer be watching from the sidelines, we'll feel it - right here - and it'll be painful because on the one hand there will be our desire to be about God's work of transformation, of healing and reconciling, but then, on the other hand, there will be our fear that the cost may be too great; that we'll be overwhelmed. And so we'll find ourselves carrying, bearing the tension, the division, in ourselves.

**But we won't do so alone.** That's the beauty of being part of this body of Christ.

On Wednesday evening there were 22 people in our little chapel meditating together. The vast majority of them were those who never attend a church service but they know - maybe instinctively, maybe because of what they've been through - that the first step to becoming aware, to waking up, to connecting, is to begin that interior journey. You may have been coming to church all your life but you may not have dared explore the interior life. Why not give it a try? (Tues am or Wed eve)

Or how about this? When I was in the pub a few weeks ago, after this service, some of us got talking about the ecological crisis. We talked about this gulf between our knowledge and our action and reflected on feelings of anxiety and hopelessness. And we came up with the idea of starting a group in the Autumn to explore the spiritual resources needed to be a resilient and hope-filled community in a time of deep planetary crisis; how might we best support one another and those beyond, in the urgent work that is now required? Are you interested in that?

Because at the end of the day of course, the church - us here and throughout the globe - the church is called to be a very explicit 'sign of the times'. That's the whole point of us being here. William Temple (Archbishop in the 1940's) said, 'the church is the one society that exists not for its own sake but for the world beyond'. We're asked to model that alternative kingdom for the sake of those beyond the church; to be a sign of what is possible; a sign of how to be a people of hope, of deep compassion and connection, of awareness and aliveness! How sad then that so much of the churches time is taken up rearranging the deck chairs on the ship; taken up with minutiae and religious trivia; taken up with internal wranglings that have a whiff of trying to tame the wild and unmanageable spirit, keeping God in a box of our own making.

**Please, in the light of today's gospel, can you ask yourself, where might God be asking you to move into a deeper sense of awareness and reality? And where are you going to look to discover the resources you need to make that move?**

And let's ask that of ourselves as a church too: where is God calling us to a deeper sense of awareness; to a more engaged discipleship?

Don't let J's words just wash over you, like water off a ducks back. Let's sit up and take notice. This is Jesus at his most hard hitting. But then, perhaps he has to be ..... after all, what does it take to wake us up?

*Dilly Baker, Rector*