

Not Nice and Comfortable - Luke 12 49-59

Nice and Comfortable – what’s wrong with nice and comfortable!

Australia is a nice and comfortable country; Canberra is a nice and comfortable city. Our homes are nice and comfortable, our cars are nice and comfortable (with a few exceptions) and nice and comfortable is grown up – isn’t it? We are nice people who are increasingly built for comfort rather than speed.

And Wesley is a nice and comfortable church full of nice comfortable people living nice comfortable lives. What could possibly be wrong with that?

Well according to the Luke reading today – that is not the deal. We often have a nice comfortable reading of what Jesus said – a sort of polite domesticated version which doesn’t make you late for breakfast. However, Jesus has a tendency to challenge the nice and comfortable, the polite and the expected, with shocking, disturbing and unexpected sayings. Jesus did not come to make us comfortable – but uncomfortable and to teach us that we do not get God on *our terms* and *our agenda*, we do not get to set the rules – but we have our rules and comfort zone challenged.

The Luke 12 reading today present some of the difficult sayings of Jesus – because they cannot be easily domesticated. It is always tempting to avoid these kind of verses when they appear in the liturgy. At a most basic level it appears to be an endorsement of conflict and disunity. Surely this cannot be right!

*<sup>49-50</sup> “It is fire that I have come to bring upon the earth—how I could wish it were already ablaze! There is a baptism that I must undergo and how strained I am until it is over!*

*<sup>51-53</sup> “Do you think I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, not peace, but division! For from now on, there will be five people divided against each other in one house, three against two, and two against three. It is going to be father against son, and son against father, and mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law!”*

Well the first step is to see these verses in relation to the context and the audience. Sometimes Jesus was talking to the crowds and sometimes he is teaching a small group of disciples.

There are important texts and events that come before today's reading. At the beginning of the chapter Luke sets the theme of not being afraid of people who can kill you (and therefore of death) but to trust God is in control – even of sparrows.

In Luke 12 verse 13 we see that one of the crowd asked Jesus to settle a legal dispute with his brother – as would be appropriate for a Rabbi. However, Jesus refuses this role – saying “who gave me the right to settle disputes” – and focuses instead on teaching on not focusing on our self-interests - with the story of not having big barns. Wealth does not prevent death. Therefore – place your treasure in heaven – not on earth. And we do this by acting as good servants – focusing on the job we have been given – not getting distracted by wealth and other concerns, by our selfish self-interests.

The passage at the end of the chapter and the second part of today's Luke 12 reading - about predicting the weather (when you see the cloud rising in the west, you say at once that it is going to rain, and so it does) is Jesus talking to the crowd. We see Jesus repeating the same points he made to the crowd earlier – do the right thing – and don't get caught up in legal disputes (Jesus says .... *if you are going before the magistrate with your opponent do your best to come to terms with him while you have the chance*). This could be a rebuke to the man who appeared in verse 13 who tried to embroil Jesus in his legal dispute with his brother.

However, in the middle of the Luke 12 we have Jesus change his audience – he is now making comments and observations to his disciples – not to the general crowd.

In verse 41 Peter asks for an explanation of the story of the servants. Jesus just repeats the point that the servants need to keep focused on their master's business and not to get distracted. It is not about our business; it is about Gods business.

This 'hard passage' about fire on the earth, baptisms and divisions was then addressed to Jesus' disciples rather than to the general crowds. It can be seen as a personal reflection on Jesus mission and forthcoming death and was one of those moments of Jesus humanity that he shared with his closest of friends. Jesus mission was not nice and comfortable. It would cost him his life. The hard

passage can also be seen as a reflection on the line in the earlier verse 48 which says *much will be expected from the one who has been given much, and the more a man is trusted, the more people will expect of him*. This is a strange shift in terminology reflected in the JB Phillips translation – it is no longer the master who expects more but people – you have got to wonder if Jesus was actually talking about himself and “the people” were the crowds. Much was and still is expected of Jesus. Maybe our nice, comfortable and self-interested expectations of Jesus are a source of the conflict and division among ourselves and others – our own need for emotional and psychological security may be the problem as our own expectation and image of God is a source of conflict and division.

Jesus made it very clear to his disciples that their path would not be nice and comfortable either. They would not be wealthy, they would not be respected and they would make many enemies – some from within their own families. To be a follower of Jesus means that we do not get to set the terms, to define the rules or to be comfortable.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested that genuine grace is not nice and comfortable but required costly discipleship and following Christ to the cross. *When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die*. However, in that process we lose our fear of man, our fear of death and find a new freedom. This is why Bonhoeffer suggested that we should regard people not in the light of what they do but in the light of what they suffer – in the effect what we become in Christ.

My recent experience with cancer has forced me to re-evaluate a number of my assumptions. Someone asked me if cancer was easier if you were a Christian. My answer was yes and no – yes in that there was a sense of hope and purpose – no in that you do not avoid the suffering that cancer brings to you and your family. You can't force God to do your will and peace is only possible to find when we abandon the god in the shape of our ego who does our will and accept that God is in control not us. As Bonhoeffer argued – although not enjoyable the suffering can be a gift

It reminds me not to worry about my life – my wealth – or my reputation, God is the one who is in control not me. I cannot make myself live one day longer. I cannot set the rules for God and my reputation, financial wellbeing, security and comfort are in God's hand. The issue of whether I live or die rests, as it always has, with God.

The atheist who believes that they are in control of the universe and can somehow control manage their fate is deluded. As with the rich-man and his warehouse, we are not in control over our own life. However, we Christians can be equally deluded – and secretly believe that we are in control of God. Maybe if we follow the rules enough, maybe if we give enough, maybe if we are good enough we can make God do what we want – and we will therefore never die. Here is the basis of the conflict described in these verses. We must transcend our individual and tribal deity to encounter God. The Lord's prayer says *Your kingdom come, your will be done* not your kingdom come – my will be done. We are Gods servants – God is not our servant!

So how do we live with that?

My favourite social theorist is a man called Pierre Bourdieu. His key point is that we are often so caught up in the games around us that we do not recognise how biased they are and we fail to make the difference that we could. We are caught up in the games of wealth, reputation, status and power associated with our work, our family, society and even our church. The point I see in the Luke 12 passage is that we cannot conscript God in our agenda and when we are willing to let go of these games and be seen as a failure by society, employer and even our own parents, we become free. Free to make a difference, free to play a different game, free to be God's servant in the world.

From that perspective there is little point worrying about what everyone else worries about - firstly the fear of dying which is the fear of loss – be that personal or financial. The important question is what is it that we need to do now? What is our purpose for still being here? What is Gods will and how can we be part of Gods kingdom rather than our own ego shaped kingdom? Is our God bigger than a good luck charm and a car park genie?

With these questions in mind let us take a brief time of reflection. I want you to reflect on these question this morning and throughout the next week.

- How am I attempting to control God?
- How is God calling me to leave my physical, emotional and psychological comfort zone?
- What is Gods agenda in the spaces I am in? How can I be Gods servant where I am rather than following the normal rules of the game?