

Seasons – A Pastoral Message

Luke 12:49-54

August 2022

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Not Peace but Division

⁴⁹ “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

Interpreting the Times

⁵⁴ He said to the crowd: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. ⁵⁵ And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. ⁵⁶ Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?”

Intro

Jesus asks:

“ How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present **time**? ”

Let’s pick up on that very last word from Jesus translated as – ‘time’. In the Greek of the New Testament there are two words for time: The first is *chronos* which is about what hour of the day or what month or year it is. So let me ask:

Q₁ Do you know what *chronos*-time it is?

A₁ And we all look for a chronological devices – clocks, watches etc.

Then there is *kairos* which is about the quality of time as we refer to in the 4 seasons or when we say it was war time or Covid time. This is what Jesus is talking about here - interpreting this present *kairos*-time.

Q₂ Do you know what *kairos*-time this is?

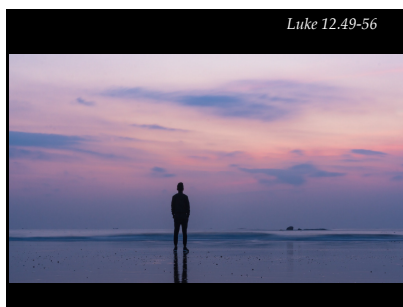
A₂ As it’s cold we would quickly say it’s winter-time.

There is much more to this *Kairos* than recognizing this season as determined by the wobble of the earth on its axis.

TIME?

What *chronos*-time is it?

What *kairos*-time is it?



Jesus was wanting people to be aware of the *kairos*-time/season in his day to recognize God acting in the history of his people and the world.

So, after talking graphically about the disruption and division that he was bringing into the world, Jesus got openly frustrated with the people in front of him for not interpreting the *kairos*-time.

He saw that they could read the signs in the weather to anticipate what was coming but they could not interpret the signs of the *kairos* to recognize the season of God they were entering into.

Just as an aside, we in this region read the weather signs to mean the opposite of what they indicated to Jesus where he was. Our south wind is certainly not hot and our heavy rain is not from the west.

Discussion

I believe our first spiritual responsibility is to discern and the Holy Spirit comes to help us in that.

In my experience, spiritual discernment often runs on contrast.

I step into a place and it's suddenly different. That may be with a sudden sweet awareness of the Holy Spirit or it may be a sudden cold unsettled heaviness.

Again, this is just me but stepping into church buildings can bring both as can houses and being around individual people too.

So, in asking the question about this spiritual season I compare it to what was before.

What are we experiencing now that is different from before? It's about noticing change.

We may apply this to ourselves, the nation and the church, and specifically this church.

I have been listening to reflections on concerning the season of the church for almost a decade.

The people of God have known very difference *kairos*-seasons that are described through-out the Bible.

There have been:

- seasons of growth and peace
- seasons of wilderness and exile
- seasons of persecution and suffering
- seasons of rebuilding and recovery
- seasons of abundance and seasons of poverty
- seasons of harvest and season of pruning



Never think that the walk with God is a constant one size for all experience. It is not. God is at work in each season but in different ways.

So, we need to be asking:

- What season are we in as a church?
- What season are we each in personally?
 - What is this *Kairos* we live now?

Prayer:

Holy Spirit bring us to discernment and recognition of your hand in this day?

What is the kairos of this time?

Take us beyond reading the winds of the earth and angle of the sun to interpret all in your light.

May we recognize more than the colour of clouds at dawn and dusk.

Grant us an understanding of where we are and what you are calling us to.

Let's study this now...

Q₃ So what is the season of this church?

A₃ Can you turn to someone and share what we see?

Note offerings:

Pastoral Reflection:



The change of seasons for this church in the last few years has been very big. The word that describes what I feel as our season now is 'loss'. Loss and all it brings is what I see characterizing the spiritual atmosphere, mood, culture and thinking.

If I work from macro to micro or, from outside in there is so much loss.

- The Christian Church has lost its place in society and faith is being over-run by godless secularism. This is not just here in Dunedin or New Zealand but across the Western world. It's not a total surprise and has been progressing since the 1960s but it's really landed now. Being a Christian is so uncool and attacking churches and Christianity is seen as the right thing to do. Sadly, there are good reasons for people to think negatively about Christians and churches. We are not in the sunshine.
- Then 4 years ago this church suffered a catastrophic loss when the Pastor and most of the congregation left over a dispute with the denomination. That brought a huge loss at many levels.

This now gets personal and possibly painful: If St Matthew's is your home, your church family, your base community this really hurt. You lost relationships, history and more as so many people you loved walked out the door and left you.

I was not here but it seems St Matthew's went from being an energetic mid-size church with a sense of adventure to being a remnant, a small group of remainers who had to find each other and weave a new fabric as best they could. You had never been a small church before. Look at how things are set up here. The scale is 150 plus. Having the sound desk and projector controlled from the very back means those people are now cut off and isolated again because the layout is not for 25 but 250.

Some of you look at the furniture and places around this church to be reminded of people you know and love who stepped away. That is painful loss.

- In the 16 months during which I have been here I see some of us losing health and strength.
- Then, as can happen, life has been rough for some of us. Our families have struggled and we had to step up.
- Then there was Covid and its lingering disruption and impact. It's still here and it's not done yet. It may take some years more before we are over it. Covid seems to have accelerated the stripping of so much of what we had come to enjoy as normal. It is like the thief that comes to kill and destroy. The nutshell assessment I hear is that the impact of Covid has been to accelerate and advance many trends and processes that were moving slowly at a manageable rate. It has been disturbing and we have lost again.

Digestion

Turn to your neighbour and discern what I have shared here.

Q4 Does this ring true?

Q5 What might be missing?

Note offerings:

Q₆ Does all this mean God has abandoned us?

A₆ Well only if he abandoned his people in the wilderness or in exile and captivity.

So no, just because its hard and difficult that does not mean God has abandoned us.

Application

Q₇ So what should we do in a season of loss?

A₇ That is a question many people are asking and many are speaking into in consequence of covid

I hear two scriptures speaking to me now. You may hear more? The first is:

² Preach the word/*message*; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

2 Timothy 4:2 NIV

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2 Timothy 4:2 NIV

This is St. Paul writing to his friend Timothy - a young church leader needing encouragement. It applies to all of us.

- The Gospel is what makes us church.
- The Gospel is what makes us friends of God.
- The Gospel is what gives us hope in every dark season.

The Gospel orientates us to God and each other. It keeps us on the road with Jesus and looking forward to him.

You may not get to preach as a church leader but make this something you speak about – in season and out of season. Fill your heart so your mouth overflows.

Can we actually do that?

Can we actually talk, chat or ‘gossip the gospel’ as something precious and worth talking about at all times? Or, is it all left to hired guns like me for Sunday only?

The last third of Paul’s ministry had him preaching in prison and on paper which were not favourable conditions he chose for. I find that challenging and inspiring.

The second scripture I hear speaking is from the Book of Revelation.

It’s the first letter to the churches written to the church at Sardis. (Chapter 3:1-3 NRSV)

³ And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: ¹ I know your works; you have a name for being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is at the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. ³ Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

Revelation 3:1-3 NRSV

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This is a stiff message:

² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is at the point of death,

This is written to a church with a reputation for being alive and energetic. The problem with reputations is that they are always out of date and that is being pressed home here to those at Sardis. God would not let them trade on their past.

Q7 So how might we wake up and strengthen what remains?

A7 Firstly, as stated, Wake up! Snap out of the slumber. Have a cold shower and rub the sleep out of our eyes. In our case I think that means let go of all that comes with the sense of loss.

- Let go of the anger.
- Let go of the disappointment.
- Let the grief out.
- Resolve to stand up again and live.

Then comes the very specific instruction of “strengthening what remains.”

- It is not saying rebuild what was lost.
 - The students are gone. That work is over.
- It is not saying, begin new projects and dream new dreams or seek the welfare of the city
 - We have funds to work with and could dream new ventures and all get busy – No!
- It’s not saying put a bulldozer through and start again.
 - As we learn elsewhere, God values old wineskins too.
- It’s not saying “Close the doors and give up.”
- It’s saying “Wake up and strengthen what is still there.”

How would we do that?

If the church is a fellowship of the Gospel you do that by reinforcing the Gospel and strengthening the fellowship of the Spirit in love, faith and prayer that aligns us with God.

Those at Sardis were told to wake up from some sleepy self-delusion.

One form of sleep I see here at times is loss-induced.

The pain of all that loss we listed before is leading some of us to freeze as if it’s 2018?

We can be locked into the paradigm of a previous season and out of touch with this one.

I can understand why and how this works. It’s a way to cope with pain.

Change means loss and if you have had more loss than you wished for or can cope with then more change is bad. Going to sleep is one way to cope.

Conclusion:

A way Barbara and I are seeking to wake us up from the sleep of loss that locks us in a past season is to take up the practice of regular table fellowship, being together to share a meal and our lives across and around a table in Jesus.

Barbara and I are encouraged by the Holy Spirit to facilitate and lead this as our strategy for waking up and strengthening what remains.

It’s a reset back to the very basics of church so appropriate to where we are now in this season in preparation for the next season.

This is serious and not just about spicing up parish social life. If we don’t spiritually wake up and really strengthen what remains then we may expect the Lord to come as a thief in the night to take what is left.

“But Francis, we already have various fellowship arrangements – let us continue as we are.”

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Without naming specifics, they are products of another season and -while much appreciated by some- they are not strengthening what remains in this season. As is so common, they were yesterday’s solutions that can become today’s problems.

I know the thought of change can seem like the prospect of more loss.

What are they going to take away now?

I'll end with a story to sum up where I see us:

Prime the Pump

One day a man was lost in a desert without water (I have heard this story referenced to North Africa in the 1930s.) In his growing worry he saw an weathered old makeshift structure. He knew he couldn't make it much longer, so he got to the simple structure as fast as his worn-out legs could carry him. To his surprise, inside he found a corked bottle of clean-looking water. This bottle was on the floor next to a hand-pump going down into the earth.

As he reached down to pick up the bottle of water, he noticed a paper message wedged under a stone beside it.

Despite his great thirst he first read the note. It read:

"Use this water to prime the pump. When you have drawn as much water as you need, refill the jar, and leave it for the next person who will pass this way."



The man suddenly found himself on the horns of a dilemma because he was so thirsty and close to dehydration. He was desperate to drink. Could he trust the instructions?

- What if he followed the directions on the note and there was no water in the well?
- What if he poured out all of the water he now held in his hand and got nothing in return?
- Was that worth the risk to even try?

The man had to make a decision to either hydrate himself now, or pour out what he had to hand and trust that deep down there was so much more and the pump would work. He made the choice to prime the pump. It was a good choice because the pump worked and water flowed freely. He drank his fill and then collected enough water to take him on his journey.

Before he left, he refilled the bottle and placed it next to the note. Under the words of the note, he wrote, "Trust me. It works!"

In our *kairos*-season of loss we may already feel dried out and think we need every drop on hand for our own survival. If I cling to those I know in existing groups all well be well so do not let go of anything.

I am saying to you that to strengthen what remains we need to pour what we have into one single remaining fellowship as a single fellowship under God. That is what this *kairos*-season requires.

A church of 30 people is not strengthened by independent homegroups. I believe we need to wake up and recognize that.

This is not the season for privatized home-based fellowships independently doing what's right in their own eyes. This is the season to jointly strengthen what remains for this season and for what God will do next.