Jesus Divides
Luke 12:49-53

So we're continuing our summer series on the hard sayings of Jesus. And one reason for doing this is that it's only by looking at the things Jesus said that shock us, or that seem to critique the way we just naturally see life, can we be sure we're encountering the real Jesus and not simply one of our imagination.

And today's hard saying is there in Luke 12:51, where Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you but rather division."

Now, one of the major criticisms of religion in our current culture is exactly this, isn't it? That it's divisive, that it creates conflict, that we'd be much better off if people could just emphasise the stuff that unites us, rather than divides us. And so when you hear Jesus say stuff like this, it can leave you feeling uncomfortable.

So, why does he say it? Well, we're going to look at three things: Jesus divides, Jesus judges, and Jesus suffers.

Jesus Divides
Now, in our liberal, western, secular culture dogmatic religion, one group claiming to have a monopoly on the truth, is seriously out of favour. Because if you think you're right and others are wrong, that inevitably leads you to think you're superior to them, and that leads to conflict.

And you don't have to do much digging to realise that that's true. One of the local newspapers ran an article last week on the history of protestant Christianity in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, and it was titled *Great Works, Great Shame*, and began with the story of the murder in 1942 of a Jewish man by three protestants who had been encouraged to do it by the pastor of the church in their village, just a few miles from here.

And there are the Crusades, and 9/11, and Buddhist ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, and Hindu violence against other faiths in India.

And so, people say, at least in the West, 'yeh that's what's wrong with religion. It's why people should keep their religious views private, and not bring them into the public space; or seek to impose them on anyone else, or persuade them that you're right and they're wrong.' We're allergic to that kind of dogmatic religion.

And so when Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt 10:34) or that he's come to bring division, it sits very uncomfortably.

But of course, if you look at what Jesus says, it gets worse, because he says the division he's come to bring extends even to the level of our most cherished relationships.

The Haskell Library in the US is famous, because it's not only in the US, it's also in Canada. In fact, the US/Canadian border runs right through it. Half of the library's in Vermont, the other half in Quebec and the border line is painted on the floor right through the building. And Jesus is saying that he's come to paint just such a dividing line through our homes: Matthew 10:35, 'I have come to set a man again his father, and a daughter against her mother'; and v37, 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.'

Now, in our current culture, marriage is increasingly delayed and the number of couples who say they don't want to have children is on the rise. It's as if the traditional family is going out of fashion. In a recent interview, Mary Eberstadt, senior research fellow at the Faith and Reason Institute said, 'As families continue to shrink and crumble, fewer and fewer understand what a robust kinship network even looks like.' And the general illiteracy of what family looks like is why she says, 'so many millennials are so uninterested in marriage and kids.' It's a society she says, where 'many people have no idea what a benevolent father even is… where many men will never know the joy and spiritual deepening of fatherhood; where many women reach middle age without ever having held a baby, let alone having loved and nurtured one from birth to adulthood.'

And yet, even in a culture that increasingly devalues the kinship network of parenting and family, the words of Jesus shock, don't they? Because what kind of religious teacher demands that you choose him over your own family? That's the stuff of cults. And yet, that's what's so disconcerting about Jesus. Because your average cult leader is either incredibly narcissistic, or mad. But Jesus is neither. Meet someone with delusions of grandeur, meet a narcissist and you know that's what you've met. But when you encounter Jesus in the gospels, you realise that's not him.

The character of a cult leader rings huge alarm bells; but Jesus - it's his character that makes him so attractive, isn't it? It's the fact that he welcomes the despised and outcast, that he binds up the broken, not manipulates them; it's his mercy, his humility, his grace, combined with his courage that's the very thing that draws you to him.

And yet, here he is saying the very reason he's come is to divide, and divide at the closest of family levels.

Now, if in our age family is out of fashion, that was anything but the case in his. For the people he's talking to family was pretty much all they had. I mean, today, you have your career, your pension, maybe some investments; you have the safety net of the state. But their lives, their jobs, their security, their social circle, would all have depended on family. And so in that kind of patriarchal society, for Jesus to say he would turn a son against his father was about as socially shocking as you could get.

And it's not Jesus' *teaching* that will divide. It's him. He's demanding a place in people's affections, that trumps every other affection. That the allegiance you give him supersedes every other allegiance. Matthew 10:37 again, 'Whoever *loves* father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.' He's demanding that we love him above anyone you would normally most love; that your love for everyone else must take second place to your love for him.

It's no wonder that a culture that doesn't like the idea of divisive doctrine or divisive personalities finds this unacceptable.

And yet, it's not quite that simple is it?

You see, in reality, it's not that our culture doesn't want anyone imposing their version of truth on anyone else, because that would bring division and conflict; it's that our current culture wants to impose *its* version of life, its worldview, on everyone else. And if you think about it, to say, 'you mustn't bring your divisive religious views into the public space', is itself a religious view, because it's a view on what makes for human thriving, what's best for society, and if I happen to disagree with it, it's divisive.

And just think how our current culture turns on those who disagree with it. How it sets people against each other. Maybe you saw the treatment meted out recently to JK Rowling, of Harry Potter fame. She suggested that there were real biological differences between men and women, and she was denounced as a result, even by those stars whose careers her books had spawned. You see, if you step out of line with the current orthodoxy, you can lose your job, your reputation, and your relationships. It's not just Christ who divides, so does our culture.

So, the question is, which of them will give you the resources to genuinely love and seek the best for those you disagree with - whether that's in your family or outside? Which will help you treat people with respect, even honour, even as you're clear about the things that divide you? Is it Christ who says, you must love me above all others, or is it our current culture that says you must agree with us or stay silent?

Jesus Judges

Look at what Jesus says before he says he's come to bring division: Luke 12:49, "I came to cast fire on the earth and would that it were already kindled!"

Now in the Bible, fire is used as an image for a number of different things. God's presence was pictured by a pillar of fire in the exodus; when Ezekiel saw visions of God, the only way he could describe what he saw was it was like a human form encased in fire, sat on a throne. The letter to the Hebrews describes God as 'a consuming fire' (Heb 12:29). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was pictured as coming on the disciples by tongues of fire alighting on each one of them. And in describing his word, God says in Jeremiah, "Is not my word like fire?" (Jer 23:29). God's presence, God's Spirit, God's word.

So what does Jesus mean when he says he's come to cast fire on the earth? Well, look where fire has already been mentioned in Luke's gospel in the context of Jesus' coming. Luke 3:16, where John the Baptist says, "I baptise you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit *and fire*."

And maybe you think that's just another way of saying the power of the Spirit; that when Jesus fills you with his Spirit, he also fills you with fire, with power. But look what John says in the very next verse, v17, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

And that's a picture of judgment, of *refining* fire. Because what does a farmer do when he winnows the wheat? He's dividing it: the wheat from the chaff. And the wheat is preserved, but the chaff, the stuff you can't make bread with, is burnt in the fire.

So when Jesus says he's come to cast fire on the earth, he's saying he's come to initiate judgment, to divide the wheat from the chaff, to purify, to cleanse.

And that's how the prophets spoke of God's judgement. In the Old Testament, Nahum said, 'Who can stand before the Lord's indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is like fire poured out.' (Nahum 1:6). Malachi said of Messiah's coming, 'Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire… He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.' (Mal 3:2-3).

And what does a silversmith do? He also uses fire to divide, to separate the dross - all the impurities - from the silver, so that the silver might be pure.

And God does that in our individual lives. Peter talks of of your faith which is 'more precious than gold' being 'tested by fire' (1 Peter 1:7). Sometimes he'll let you go through something and it feels like he's applying the fire, you're in the silversmith's crucible, and it's getting uncomfortably warm. But he does it to burn off the dross, to drive you deeper into him, in prayer and reliance.

But he also does it in judgement. As the writer to the Hebrews says, that for those who ultimately refuse to turn to God all that's left is 'a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries' (Heb 10:27). And if our current culture doesn't like the idea of religion dividing people, the idea of a final judgment that finally divides people is out of the question.

And yet Jesus says, I have come to bring that judgment, to cast that fire on the earth.

But why would he say that? Why would the one who was compassionate and merciful to sinners, those who religious people then and now would say were most at risk of the fire of judgment, say, 'and would that it were already kindled!'? (Luke 12:49). It's as if he wants to bring it on!

Because judgment purifies and cleanses. Because Jesus sees the injustices and tragedies of life; he sees the oppression and the lies that deceive; he sees the brokenness and the pain; he sees all the sin, and all the running after false gods that will never give you what you need, and he longs for his world to be made right, to be cleansed and purified. He longs for the day when sin, and suffering and death will finally be put away.

And think about it: you long for that too. But our secular culture can never offer you that. You long for justice and the day when all wrongs will be made right, but secularism, if it's honest, can never tell you that something is fundamentally, irreducibly wrong. Because if life ultimately has no meaning, if there are no absolute rights and wrongs, how can they? If life has no meaning, neither does suffering or oppression.

And that means, you've got to get our own back in this life. You've got to shame and vilify and mock and scapegoat those you disagree with. It's why as the Judaeo-christian morality is pushed from the public space, a culture of shame takes its place.

But when you know that the fire of judgment will be cast on the earth; when you know there will be a final judgement, a final reckoning, and that truth will triumph, you don't need to try and shame or humiliate the ones on the other side of the argument. You know final judgment isn't in your hands, it's in God's. And that means you don't have to try and take people down in this life. It means you become less angry, less embittered. Something our current culture can never make you.

But still, you might say, Jesus is still talking about judgment falling on real people you disagree with. How can that be anything but hateful?

Jesus Suffers

Look at v50. After saying he's come to cast fire on the earth, Jesus says, "I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" And he can't be talking about his baptism in water, because he's already been baptised. So what is he talking about?

Well, there was a time when James and John, two of his disciples, came to Jesus to ask him a favour, 'Jesus, when you come into your glory, when you're made king, we want to be right up there on the top table, in the best seats, your right and left hand men.' And Jesus says,"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?" (Mark 10:38).

And the Old Testament prophets spoke of the cup of God's wrath, the cup of his judgment that the wicked must drink. But look what happens in the garden of Gethsemane the night before Jesus was crucified. It's as if God the Father passes him the cup and says, 'Son, it's time for you to drink that cup. The cup that every rebel, every sinner, every individual and every nation who turns their back on me deserves, I want you to drink it for them. I want you to drink it for Peter who will deny you, for James and John who will desert you. I want you to drink it for the tax collectors and the prostitutes who have come to you, for the proud pharisee and the shamed sinner. I want you to drink it down for everyone in every age who will ever put their trust in you. I want you to bear their judgment for them.'

And Jesus looked into that cup and saw all the horror of our sin, and the fire of God's judgment, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.' But the Father is not willing. And Jesus is not willing to leave us to our fate. And as the Father holds it there, Jesus prays 'Not my will but yours be done.'

And at the cross he drinks down the cup of that judgment. And he is submerged, he is baptised, he is sunk beneath the waves of God's judgment for us. When we're baptised in water, we're baptised into Christ's name. His identity becomes ours. But at the cross, he was baptised into our name; he took our place and our identity, as he bore the wrath of God we deserve. In the words of the hymn, 'Bearing shame and scoffing rude, In my place condemned He stood'. And that line of division between a son and father fell between Jesus and his heavenly Father, as he took our place on the wrong side of the line.

And as you see him taking your place, you'll love him. You'll love him more than you love yourself. You'll love him more than you love others.

And that's what'll give you the resources not just to tolerate, but to genuinely care for, and about, others.

You see when he's hanging on the cross, who does Jesus take special care of? His mother - as he commits her into John's care. And when you know that Christ died for you, even though your love for him may draw this clear line of division between you and others, even in your own family, you'll love them.

You see, if you love *yourself* more than anyone else, you'll just use other people or walk over them. And if you love *them* more than yourself, you'll need their acceptance, so you won't have the courage to confront them when real love, that seeks their best, would, instead you'll flatter them. But when Christ is your supreme love, you'll have the resources to love others sacrificially, because you know he'll take care of you; *and* you'll have the courage to speak the truth, because you're not needy for their approval.

It's by knowing Christ's infinite love for *you* at the cross, and his victory over sin in his resurrection, that you'll love him above everyone, and you'll care for, and about, those you disagree with, whether they're family, or friends, or work-colleagues, those on the other side of the line Christ draws, in ways that were impossible before.