

Reading the Signs

Luke 12:49-56

Good news. After many months here in Melbourne, I've finally worked out how to understand the weather here. I think one of these forecasting stones could be exactly what I need.

I've also been told of a large billboard that once stood at the exit from Melbourne Airport, as you drive out onto the freeway towards the city. It said, "Don't like the weather? Please wait a moment..."

It's good to smile, isn't it — and even to laugh in church. And the weather and predicting it will often be the source of mirth, especially

when predictions go wrong. Those of you who know the *Vicar of Dibley* TV series might remember the banter between the members of the Parish Council about the Great Storm. The Great Storm which blew the windmill over. "That was no great storm, that was a mild wind", and the conversation goes on to the Great Wind, the Great Snow which was actually the Great Freeze, which was actually the Great Frost. It seems that even in church, we can talk a lot about the weather! But it's no laughing matter when Jesus talks of our understanding... our understanding of the weather, for example.

Thankfully, technology has improved our ability to forecast weather extremes like cyclones, to protect life. God has given us humans this ability. People on the land seem especially wise in reading the signs of the weather, and without all the technology, because they know from experience.

And so it was in Jesus' day. He said to the crowd about him, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say 'it's going to be hot,' and it is." Humans have been made by God to be able to read such signs. But Jesus questions their ability, and our ability and willingness, to read the spiritual signs of the present time. And Jesus says that this is what is truly important.

How do we go in reading the signs? Apart from the weather, there are so many other signs that seem to be vital for life. There's, say, economic forecasting, and currently there's some doom and gloom about world economies, it seems.

Last Sunday we heard Jesus say, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also." "Be ready. Spiritually, be ready, for the master will return when you least expect." So store for yourselves my promises... and the promise he makes is, "Have no fear, little flock, for I am with you." The kingdom is yours. The kingdom is here for I am here with you.

So, where is our focus? What is our treasure? And how do we read this time spiritually? Not by sheer economics or looking to the signs in the skies or human worries. But by looking to Jesus,



for our treasure is in him and his presence to and for one another... even and especially in a new time which we are now entering together. This is a time in the life of St Paul's for us together to focus on Jesus anew as we rebuild, not only physically at Riversdale Road but spiritually. To discern the spiritual times afresh. Last Sunday we sang, "Father welcomes all his children" as we welcomed a precious little brother in Christ through Holy Baptism. Today we welcome people new to this community, and we thank God that he is at work in his welcome, and in the gifts these people are. On Thursday evening about 18 people met for the first mission connect group preparing with Dean for sharing Jesus in relationships. These are the times we are in, as we also struggle with life in the midst of death and grief. The baptismal life we share of dying and rising with Christ. It's always a time for healing, for being healed and being the healers we are called to be. This is the time we live in.

Jesus says, "Have no fear, little flock, for I am with you." And he also says, "I have come to bring fire on earth and I wish it were already kindled!" What sort of forecast is this? The fire Jesus speaks of is judgment. And note carefully that Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead. But this judge has not come just to do an inventory of whether we've deserved to have eternal life by our good lives in perfectly keeping God's Law. If that were the case, the forecast for us and for all people would be sheer doom. No, Jesus will judge in a different way. He says, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how I distressed I am until it comes." The baptism Jesus speaks of is, of course, the baptism of fire he himself will undergo on the cross. He underwent all the fury of the storm of God's anger because of our sin. He took the full brunt of the storm for us and now he has, for all people who put their faith in him, the wonder of the Easter dawn of new and eternal healed life. So live, and bring my healing. It's urgent now. Read the time. Hold on to the gift and live it, my dear ones. Father welcomes all his children. So in the baptism that Jesus has undertaken for each of you, father welcomes all his children, all of you. I would now like us together to welcome people who are, and have been, new in worship with us over the period of this last year. Please come forward now.

The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews faced times like us. And the writer set out to encourage them. They lived by faith — like us — by faith in the Word and promise of God. And so the Christians who received this letter are encouraged that they are not alone. And I encourage you now: "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us focus our eyes, our lives on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who for the sake of the joy set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame." You, we are his joy. Welcome.

[The new folks are introduced and welcomed.]

In Jeremiah 23, God says, "Let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully." And so let us covenant together to speak God's word in every season, and to speak faithfully, building up the body of Christ to become mature, holy, and blameless in his sight. For this is the time for us to rebuild in Christ. Amen.