

## **Let's Run! -- Proper 15C**

Jesus is raging today. This doesn't seem much like the tender shepherd we're used to. This sounds more like an angry prophet from the Hebrew Bible, telling us about the doom and destruction of our vineyard havens, overgrown with briars and thorns.

Jesus foretells the radical division that will take place within households because of his ideas. Then he mocks his listeners, calling them hypocrites for their acute grasp of the obvious: "Looks like rain" and "Gonna be a hot one" while they meanwhile blithely ignore another truth that is just as apparent: We are not listening to the cries of the poor; we're not trying very hard to change things for the better. We must step a heckuvalot livelier on the paths of righteousness, and there will neither be justice nor peace until we do.

If you ever have the delightful pleasure of visiting the Western Isles of Scotland, you will be amazed at the sky. A continuous progression of tall cloudbanks scud by, mixing with silvery sunshine as they pass; no two minutes have the same sky. In the Hebrides, predicting the weather is pure folly for a visitor. It is almost always somehow beautiful, but you do have to be prepared to reassess your travel plans and adjust your layers of clothing by the hour.

This is the moral world Jesus is describing. There are powerful forces – of goodness and beauty, but also of selfishness, greed and violence all around us, and their arrangement changes all the time. We have to work hard to stay aware of and engaged in lives of righteousness, and not pretend that our Sunday morning prayers will carry us through a week spent out in the ever so nautical waters of our society.

As he makes his way to Calvary, Jesus utters these harsh words to the crowd of thousands he encounters. The theologian Audrey West has suggested that it might be clearer to think of these particular remarks as a description of the World after Jesus, not a prescription for any particular behavior.

After all, for thousands of years before Jesus, the prescription for a just society had already been available in Holy Scripture, but humankind failed to take the medicine. As we heard from Isaiah, God expects justice but sees bloodshed; God expects righteousness, but hears a cry. The spiritual antidote, compounded of justice, mercy and humility, is prescribed in every religion there is; the formula is older than we know.

Listen to the Psalmist today: "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the rights of the lowly and the destitute; rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked; they have neither knowledge nor understanding; they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken; and God asks: 'How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah!'"

So Jesus is not prescribing, he is describing. He tells stories of the Kingdom of Heaven and the good pleasure God takes in giving us all that our hearts can imagine or desire. The prescription is as old as the family, and Jesus, more vehement as he gets closer to the Cross, is frustrated with our human refusal to do God's will.

It is vital to remember that these are words of love. God truly intends our happiness and is in perpetual unease at the

many ways we hurt. Today Jesus gives a gloves-off portrayal of what we will encounter as the World is transformed: There will be division. Based on human history, our very households will contain conflict and strife. To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly are not always what we are taught by our parents, are not always modeled by our heroes or our leaders, are not always readily available for imitation.

Jesus is saying, 'Don't pretend things are good out of your own convenience. Don't maintain habits and systems that only benefit the powerful. Honor your elders by getting to know them well enough to decide for yourselves what to perpetuate and what to discard.' He calls us hypocrites for pretending we are righteous while passing up many a fine opportunity to improve the lot of the dispossessed. Jesus instructs us to continually refresh our awareness: of how we treat one another, of the language we use, of the policies we endorse; to look for selfishness and self-delusion.

The one thing Jesus can't stand is complacency. Sitting still is unacceptable. No matter one's circumstances, there are always paths forward. An appetite for growth of spirit is the only vital ingredient of a godly life. Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie talks about learning to write as a child, with only British books to read. All of the characters in her first stories are blonde and blue-eyed, they eat apples, play in the snow, and talk a lot about the weather. This despite that Adichie had never been outside Nigeria, where very few folks are blonde, or blue-eyed, there are no apples, or snow, and nobody talks about the weather.

Far from being trapped in that made-up world, that bore little relation to her reality however, Adichie nurtured the

artist's spirit within her and found an education. When her family lost everything in Nigeria's civil war, she came to the United States to study. Described in *The Times Literary Supplement* as "the most prominent of a procession of critically acclaimed young anglophone authors who are attracting a new generation of readers to African literature" In 2008, she was awarded a MacArthur Genius Grant, and her books are read all over the world. Two years ago, she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, at the age of 39.

If we are not vigilant, imaginative, aware and tireless, we will continually find ourselves telling a story that someone else has crafted for us, often to help them keep us under wraps and in their control, and out of their business. Jesus knows and insists that his words and his life will propel us into the telling of our own stories, into the taking of our own actions, into the living of our own lives. And many times these lives will make others – especially those with unfairly-won power – uncomfortable and angry, but eventually obsolete. Like Adichie, we must persist; it is an enterprise that requires both faith and a lifetime of commitment. As the letter to the Hebrews so beautifully declares, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, by imitating Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." All that's required is an appetite for spirit.