

President

Let us bring our prayers to God, trusting that in his mercy and love he will welcome us, listen to us and invite us to be a part of his response to the needs of the world for which we pray.

Biddings

We pray for the prophets, teachers and leaders of our Church today: that they may speak God's truth with integrity and in humility.

We pray for the people in the world who have been given the power and responsibility of leadership: that they might follow the example of Jesus, the leader who served others in love.

We pray for people in the world who have taken power upon themselves and imposed it on nations and communities: that they might become aware of the signs around them of the coming of God's kingdom and the need for change.

We pray for families and communities divided because of religious differences and especially for followers of Jesus who today face hardship or persecution, and we give thanks for the freedom we have to worship without fear.

We pray for all who are in pain or distress, those who are bereaved or anxious and all who are struggling to find hope and meaning in their lives. We ask God to lighten their load, comfort them and assure them of his everlasting love and peace.

President

Lord God, our heavenly Father, Jesus your Son taught us that your love for each of us is greater than anything we can imagine. So in his name we offer these prayers to you, trusting in your power to shine light in the darkest of places and to bring new life and hope in lives filled with dread and despair. Amen.

Introduction to the Peace

"Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and his name shall be called the Prince of Peace." The peace of the Lord...

Blessing

God the Father fill you with knowledge of his love for you, his beloved child.
 God the Son who is with you always reassure and strengthen you in faith.
 God the Holy Spirit surround you and protect you from harm as you walk in the light of the Lord,
 and the blessing of God almighty...

*Eleventh Sunday after Trinity – 15th August 2010***Introduction and Call to Worship**

We have gathered together to worship God and to say thank you for all the blessings of our lives. We ask God to strengthen and renew us by the fiery power of his Holy Spirit so that we may live with integrity, speak his word faithfully and minister to all in his name.

Invitation to Confession

We know that we cannot hide from God the things we are ashamed of, our words and deeds that we regret and our unloving thoughts. We also believe that God forgives those who turn to him in sorrow, so let us find the courage to confess and hand over to him our weaknesses and failings so that he may set us free from them.

When we try to run from you and hide away in shame because we cannot trust you to forgive us,

Lord, have mercy.

When we distort your word to suit our own purposes and behave as if we had never heard your command to love,

Christ, have mercy.

When we ignore all the signs around us that the world is crying out for justice, peace and a recognition of the kinship of all people created in your image,

Lord, have mercy.

Today's Readings**First Reading** Isaiah 5:1-7

Isaiah tells us of a vineyard which we are to understand represents the house of Israel. The vineyard is beloved and nurtured by God yet produces unwanted wild grapes which bring about the vineyard's destruction.

Or Jeremiah 23:23-29

Jeremiah tells us of God's call to his prophets to speak his word faithfully and with integrity. He proclaims that no one can hide from God who sees and knows everyone and whose word is like a fire or an instrument of destruction.

Second Reading Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews speaks of God's people whose faith brought them through danger and adversity into safety and victory. He also talks of prophets down the ages who have suffered for their faith which is brought to fulfilment in Jesus.

Gospel Luke 12:49-56

Jesus speaks of the baptism of fire he brings to earth and of the divisive impact he will have on families and communities. He challenges us to look at the world around us and to interpret what we see.

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" (Luke 12:49-50)

Illustration

"... unto us a child is born, / unto us a Son is given,
... and his name shall be called / Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God,
the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

These are words of the prophet Isaiah included in Handel's *Messiah*. We understand them as pointers towards Jesus, God's anointed one, and other word pictures show us what the Messiah will be like and what he will do:

"He is meek and lowly of heart / and ye shall find rest unto your souls."
"He shall feed his flock like a shepherd... / and gently lead those that are with young."

We hear the triumphant proclamation of words from Revelation:

"The kingdom of this world / is become the kingdom of our Lord,
and of his Christ: / and he shall reign for ever and ever."

But in contrast to these we also hear of the suffering of the Christ at the hands of his own people:

"He was despised and rejected of men, / a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief."

and that his death in some way brings our salvation:

"Surely... he was wounded for our transgressions, / he was bruised for our iniquities...
... and with his stripes we are healed."

We may not understand the full meaning of Christ's passion and his redeeming work on the cross but it is at the heart of our faith that Jesus, God's chosen one, suffered, died and was buried before rising from the dead.

Gospel Teaching

To understand more about the Gospel reading today we need to remember that the disciples had no concept of a suffering Messiah. They, like all the people of Israel, were waiting for the one who would establish his rule, free Israel from oppression and bring judgement on everyone else.

This expected judgement was often symbolised by fire, so when Jesus says that he came to bring fire to the earth, the disciples would make this link between fire and judgement. When he then referred to a baptism, they might also have made a link with the teaching of John the Baptist, who foretold the coming of one who would baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit.

But baptism and judgement were surely for Gentiles, not for God's chosen people? The disciples are in for a shock, because not only is this baptism for all people, it also has to be undergone by Jesus himself. Indeed, says Jesus, he is under stress until this baptism is completed.

Another shock wave hits his listeners when Jesus says that far from bringing peace on earth he will in fact bring division and conflict within families and communities.

From our perspective two thousand years later we can see that over the centuries a commitment to Jesus has indeed brought conflict and personal suffering, but for the disciples this must have been a blow to their belief in a conquering king and the triumph of Israel, with them at the centre of the action.

Application

Perhaps his followers found these words of Jesus discouraging and daunting and perhaps they are disturbing to us today.

It may be that the belief of the people of Israel that as descendants of Abraham they were safe from judgement is mirrored in any temptation for us to believe that our baptism and regular church attendance give us a similar status. Some of us may have an uneasy sense that there must be more to it; that if we were true followers of Jesus our lives as individuals and as a church would be having a greater impact on the world around us.

A true commitment to discipleship must surely change our lives so radically that we may cause division in our families and communities.

If we do as Jesus suggests and look at what's happening in the world around us, we may well see the signs of an urgent need for lives to be lived differently; for justice to replace oppression, for reconciliation to replace conflict, for generosity to replace greed and for a sense of humankind as a family united under God to replace prejudice and hatred.

Perhaps in recognising these signs and committing ourselves to doing what we can to turn things around we are undergoing the baptism of fire Jesus brings to the earth. Perhaps then we will understand more fully these words of Isaiah also in Handel's *Messiah*:

"The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, / and all flesh shall see it together:
for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

SUMMARY

1. Our Christian faith teaches us about the suffering of Christ and his death on the cross.
2. The earliest followers of Jesus had no concept of a suffering Messiah, only of God's anointed one who would free the people of Israel and bring judgement on others.
3. Jesus spoke to them about a baptism of fire and how he would cause division among people on earth.
4. We are invited to think about how we might live out that baptism of fire so that God's will is done and God's kingdom is established among us.