

THE DIVISIVE JESUS

Luke 12:49-56

August 18, 2019

“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild . . . ” Such is a favorite Sunday School notion of the Lord. The sound you hear is people who’ve actually read the Gospels *gagging*.

“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child . . . ” are the opening lines of one of Charles Wesley’s well-known hymns, but for painting a word-picture of Jesus, he could hardly have chosen a less applicable word than “mild,” especially in light of today’s Gospel reading.

How ‘bout this instead: “Divisive Jesus, strong and riled . . .”?

Well, maybe “riled” isn’t quite the right word for this particular passage either – we’d be better to rework the phrasing of Wesley’s lyrics so that we don’t have to rhyme with “child” – but *riled* is closer to the truth than is *mild*.

In his book, *Your God is Too Small*, J.B. Phillips rips into the “meek and mild” vocabulary sometimes used about Jesus. J.B. Phillips says, “Why ‘mild?’ Of all the epithets that could be applied to Christ this seems one of the least appropriate. For what does ‘mild,’ as applied to a person, conjure up to our minds? Surely a picture of someone who wouldn’t say ‘boo’ to the proverbial goose; someone who would let sleeping dogs lie, and avoid trouble wherever possible; someone of a placid temperament who is almost a stranger to the passions of red-blooded humanity; someone who is a bit of a nonentity, both uninspired and uninspiring.

“This word ‘mild’ is apparently deliberately used to describe a man who did not hesitate to challenge and expose the hypocrisies of the religious people of his day: a man who had such ‘personality’ that he walked unscathed through a murderous crowd; a man so far from being a nonentity that he was regarded by the authorities as a public danger; a man who could be moved to violent anger by shameless exploitation or by smug complacent orthodoxy; a man of such courage that he deliberately walked to what he knew would mean death, despite the earnest pleas of well-meaning friends! Mild! What a word to use for a personality whose challenge and strange attractiveness twenty centuries

have by no means exhausted. Jesus Christ might well be called 'meek,' in the sense of being selfless and humble and utterly devoted to what he considered right, whatever the personal cost, but 'mild,' never!"

So meek and mild. But actually, though, we're more concerned about a word Jesus Himself used in this passage as a descriptor of His ministry. It is *division*. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" He asked. "No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Division is a troubling word, and as it happens, divisive talk and actions from Jesus or about Jesus keep cropping up in the Gospels. Consider:

When John the Baptist was announcing Jesus' coming, he said, "His winnowing fork in in His had, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His granary; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire: (Luke 3:17).

In the early days of Jesus' ministry, when He visited the Nazareth synagogue with His reputation as a preacher and healer preceding Him, the congregation initially "spoke well of Him." But Jesus wasn't content to leave it at that, and intentionally provoked them with His "hometown" comments to the point that they wanted to dispatch Him over a cliff (Luke 4:16-30).

When Jesus spoke to a crowd at the festival of booths in Jerusalem about rivers of living water, some hearers decided He was the Messiah. Others doubted it, however, and the gospel narrator says, "So there was a division in the crowd because of Him" (John 7:43).

In elaborating on His "I have come to bring . . . division" comments in today's reading, Jesus talked about setting father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and vice versa in all three cases.

And let's not forget that in the Matthean parallel to today's reading, Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a *sword* (Mt 10:34, italics added).

Is this the sort of Jesus we want? Lord knows we already have enough things that divide us – politics, nationalism, ethnicity, economic status, social standing, educational

level, religions denominations, cultural issues (such as gun control, abortion, immigration, same-sex marriage, and so on) without also having a divisive Savior.

And consider what we're saying when we label someone as having a "divisive personality." That phrase denotes "disruptive, unsettling, alienating, troublesome, controversial, and contentious." Wow! Even the Bible itself says, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them" (Titus 3:10).

So do we want a Jesus whose stated purpose for coming to earth is to bring division?! Not peace. *Division*. No wonder some have glossed Him over with "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" pabulum.

The point is [and you can quit listening here if you get this point!] the point is that Jesus' call demanded—and still does demand—some significant decisions about what takes priority in one's life.

Those words about bring not peace but division were spoken to his *disciples*, as opposed to any who might be in conflict with Him. His purpose seems to be to correct any misconceptions they held about what following Him entailed. When He asked them, rhetorically, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth?" He was challenging their assumption that He was going to establish the messianic reign Israel had long looked for, where they would be an independent people again, secure in the borders of a land flowing with milk and honey. Commentator Stephen Wright says, "the most powerful thrust of Jesus' words is surely against the comfortable assumption that the promised time of peace would involve perpetuation of the standard segregation of the world into the nation of Israel and 'the nations,' the Gentiles: the assumption that 'peace' would involve victory of the former over the latter." That' as we now know, was not where Jesus was headed. He was already feeling the shadow of the Cross, and, if the disciples were going to stay with Him, they needed to know that the way ahead would force them to not only shuck off their expectations of messianic peace, but also to make hard choices about who or what had a claim on them.

When Clarence Jordan founded the koinonia Farm in south Georgia, an interracial Christian community, his attempt to live out his call as a disciple of Jesus led to his excommunication from his local church. (Can we say 'Division'?) As he tells it, "the little

country church to which I belonged invited me one summer to hold a revival meeting. They had heard that I had graduated from the Baptist Theological Seminary . . . uh, Seminary. So I accepted, and I preached to those people and I preached the Word of God in *south Georgia*, and I didn't think that I would survive the ordeal, for when Jesus went back to *his* little hometown to preach not a revival but just one youth sermon on Sunday morning, they caught on to what he was saying before he even got to his closing point, and they took him out to the end of town to dash him over the cliff. (That's one of the big troubles about Jesus' preaching: you understand it.)

"Well, I expected to be in that dilemma, but I wasn't; much to my amazement, when I got through preaching, and those dear ole deacons came by and said, 'that was a sweet sermon, I wondered where they were during it all! They again asked me to preach and again I tried to make it clear. I supplied for the pastor time and again, but somehow I could never make myself be heard. But gradually, as Koinonia took shape and the word that had been preached to these people became flesh, and they could see it, then they caught on. Not only was I not asked to preach to these people anymore, I was excommunicated, along with all the rest at Koinonia, from the membership of that church. At last the sermon had been delivered."

Clarence Jordan founded his Koinonia community in south Georgia in the early sixties. And still today Jesus' call has a divisive element to it. He still calls you and me to divide ourselves from those who urge us to morally stray, to not put family loyalty above doing His will, to not believe or follow those who act as if peace and happiness lies in possessions, to stand against societal voices that build up the self at the expense of others. In our individual case, the divisive part of Jesus' call may be quite specific and personally tailored to our individual lives.

This story was told in Amsterdam after the severe storms and floods Holland suffered in 1952. The scene was one of those parishes where people felt themselves strictly bound to obey God's commandments, and therefore to keep the Sabbath holy. Keep the Sabbath holy! That was one of the topmost commandments for them. Well, the place was so threatened by wind and waves that the dyke had to be strengthened one *Sunday* if the inhabitants were to survive.

The police notified the pastor, who now found himself in a religious difficulty. Should he call out the people of the parish that had been entrusted to him and set them to

the necessary work, if it meant profaning the Sabbath? He found the burden of making a personal decision too much for him, and he summoned the Church Council to consult and decide.

The discussion went as one might suppose. We live to carry out God's will. God, being omnipotent, can always perform a miracle with the wind and waves. Our duty is obedience, whether in life or in death.

The pastor tried one last argument, perhaps against his own conviction. Did not Jesus Himself, on occasion, break the fourth commandment and declare that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath?

Thereupon a venerable old man stood up: "I have always been troubled, Pastor, by something that I have never yet ventured to say publically. Now I must say it. I have always had the feeling that our Lord Jesus was just a bit of a liberal."

Amen.