

Luke 12:49-59

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 September 2013

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] So, and this morning we're asking the question, what are the times that we live in like?! What are the times we live in like? What characterises these days here in London, in West London? What ought to be our perspective on the world in which we find ourselves? And the answer to those questions, the media offers, I think, a pretty consistent set of answers.

In the first place, we are told, aren't we regularly, that financially we are on the road to recovery. That we're on the way to a healthy financial state. Now whether you agree with that or not, you cannot argue that the last 40 years, despite the various bumps in the economy, have seen unprecedented economic prosperity in our country.

Unemployment figures are getting lower, aren't they, bit by bit? Unemployment. The government is just about not acquiring any more national debt. People are beginning to spend money again. You'll have noticed in the last couple of months, if you go to Elam Broadway, that shops are beginning to be filled up again, aren't they?

Albeit with charity shops and pound shops, but they are beginning to be filled up again, aren't they? No one is denying that there are still many people finding it tough.

[1 : 19] But the big picture, nationally, and when you look particularly over the last 20 to 30 years, these are times where people create wealth and they enjoy wealth.

At the same time, the media reminds us, doesn't it, these are days of terror. If we're honest with ourselves, while we've been shocked at terrorism in other countries, apart from 7-7 and the guy in Woolwich earlier this year, we have been relatively sheltered, haven't we, from terrorism. Wouldn't you agree? It's true that a number of Britons died last week as a result of terrorist attacks in Kenya, and it's true that some people have great fear that terror is going to somehow turn up on our doorstep, but for the most part, for most of us, terrorism is something that happens in other countries, in other parts of the world.

And even the worldwide spread of terrorism reminds you and I, we live in a pretty lucky country, don't we? When you put our relative safety alongside our economic prosperity, you throw in what isn't a terrible climate in London.

It's a city with some of the greatest buildings in the world. It's a city of great culture. Our sporting teams do all right. We have the afterglow of the London Olympics. These are pretty good days, aren't they?

[2 : 44] Aren't they? Good days in a good country. Good days, good times to be thankful for. And we should be. There should be times to enjoy.

At least that's the common perspective. But as we turn to the Bible this morning, we find that God speaks words to us, which cause us to sharpen our view of the world. And we see the times that we live in from Jesus' perspective.

And he does that for us today by doing three things. He takes us to what it was like for him, his times, what the times were like for the people in which he lived. And then he asks us questions about our times.

The setting is near Galilee. It's in the Middle East when we've gone to time travel 2,000 years. And there we find the Lord Jesus talking to his contemporaries about what their times were like.

And Jesus was getting them to answer the same question as he asked us this morning. What are the times that we live in like? And in the first place we find him talking about his experience.

[3 : 47] Then he goes on to the people that lived in his time. And then he comes to us. So I want you to see the first thing is this. He came to earth to bring fire. Verse 49.

Do you see that? I came to cast fire on the earth. And would that it were already kindled. Would that it were already started.

A fire in the Bible is often the symbol of judgment. And it seems to me completely likely that that's the way that Jesus is using it here. He's come to earth to bring fire.

He's come to earth to bring the judgment of God. However it seems to me that Jesus recognizes that God's judgment will begin with him. If I can put it like that. It will begin when God pours out his judgment on Jesus at the cross.

God's fire will be kindled. Will become ablaze. When Jesus takes human sin on his shoulders. And I think that's what Jesus means in verse 50.

[4 : 46] He's basically saying the same thing as verse 49. But using different words. In Luke 12 and 50. The ESV I think gets it right. The NIV which we used to use.

And some of you still got. Puts a but in there at the start of verse 50. But that shouldn't be there. And the ESV would do even better. If it put an and at the start of verse 50.

In verse 49 he has said. I have come to bring fire. And he wishes that it was already kindled. And listen to verse 50. And I have a baptism to be baptized with. And how great is my distress.

Until it's accomplished. I hope that you can see the similarity between verse 49 and verse 50. That's the same thing. Jesus is talking about something that has not taken place yet.

And in both verses. He is expressing. His hope. That what needs to happen. What needs to take place. Wouldn't be too far away. When Jesus refers to his baptism.

[5 : 46] That he must undergo. He is using the word metaphorically. To refer to his death. Given that the prospect. Of this baptism. Is so distressing.

To Jesus. It's hard to imagine him referring to anything else. He is all too conscious. Conscious isn't he. The Lord Jesus. That a day is coming. When Jesus will be baptized in death.

When he will be sprinkled with death. When he will be immersed in death. When he will be baptized in death. When he will be united to death. When he will be united to the judgment of God.

In the realms of Shea. It is in this sense. When Jesus' baptism comes. The fire he brings will be kindled. And Jesus knows this is why he came.

Why did Jesus come? He came to bring fire. He came to endure that baptism. He came in order that he might bring in the justice of God.

[6 : 45] By bearing the justice of God. Now as you can already see. This is not a very easy passage is it? And there are more difficulties for you and I to wrestle with as we go on.

But the next point that Jesus makes is not hard to understand at all. Jesus has told us in verse 49 he comes to bring fire. And then he tells us he's come to bring division. Do you get it?

People think that Jesus came to bring peace. He's the prince of peace isn't he? And there's a very real sense in which Jesus does bring peace. The judgment of God.

Which Jesus will endure. The fire. And the baptism that we've just been thinking. That experience for Jesus. Will ensure for his followers. That they will experience a peace with God.

Because the judgment of God. Fell on Jesus. His followers. Those who trust him. Can know peace with God. That is all certainly true.

[7 : 41] It's definitely true. But when it comes to the impact. That Jesus has on human beings. There's a very real sense in which Jesus did not come to bring peace. Instead he came to divide.

Look at verse 51. Do you think that I've come to bring peace on earth? No I tell you. But rather division. And he goes on to explain how that will affect families in particular.

From now on there will be five in one family. Divided against each other. Three against two. And two against three. They will be divided. Father against son. Son against father. Mother against daughter. Daughter against mother.

Mother in law against daughter in law. And daughter in law against mother in law. And Jesus is asking. His followers to imagine a family. Of five. Two choose to follow Jesus.

The others in the family don't. And so as a result. That family is divided. Half the family have entered the kingdom. Half the family resolutely remain outside.

[8 : 40] The mother Jesus refers to. And the mother in law of course. One person and the same person. So you see how it might work. So for example. Let's do an example. A father and a mum and a dad.

They turn to Jesus. But the daughter. And the son. And the son's wife. Turn away from Jesus. They reject him. So there are two against three.

And instead of bringing peace. In that family. There is disharmony. And there is disagreement. Now these are really outrageous verses aren't they?

They obliterate any simplistic picture of Jesus. That sees Jesus just as a nice guy who wanted everyone to get along. These verses make it blindingly clear. That tolerance. Was not Jesus' number one virtue. In his mind. As a result. I find it absolutely tragic. [9 : 41] When people speak as if tolerance was all that Jesus was about really. You've heard it too. They say Jesus was a great lover of peace. And harmony. Jesus would certainly have rejected the dogmatism.

Of today's Christians. Christians should stop taking the apostle Paul so seriously. And get back to the essence of Christianity. You read the gospels. And the gospels tell you about the tolerant love of Jesus.

Now I've heard that many times. As you have. But people who say your sins couldn't be further from the mark. They've misunderstood Jesus. It seems impossible to me.

That those people who tell you. Go back to the gospels. Have actually read the gospels. They certainly have read Luke 12. The Jesus we find in this chapter.

Is one that the western world. Is woefully unprepared to meet. And the western church. Jesus explicitly says. Doesn't he. I did not come to bring peace.

[10 : 39] I am not a peacemaker. I'm a division bringer. And I'm a fire starter. He says. I've come to turn families against each other. Now.

Don't misunderstand me. He's not saying that's his ultimate goal. We know in other places. That the bible very clearly says. That family is at the centre of God's purposes. Jesus is not saying here.

I'm aiming to destroy families. But he's saying that he has an aim. And his aim. Will mean disharmony for some families. He's not saying today.

My goal is to ruin your family. He's not saying that. But he is saying this. My goal. Is to ask people. To show a loyalty. That surpasses all other loyalties.

I am asking you. Jesus says. To put me before absolutely everything. Even your flesh and blood. And that is why family life. Can be placed under great stress.

[11 : 36] Can't it. When somebody chooses to follow the Lord Jesus. Because they've introduced him to that life. A principle of loyalty. That is higher. Than the principle of loyalty to the family.

I think that's what happens. Most of the time. You know when there's strife and trouble in families. It's nearly always. Because the goal of kind of family harmony.

Has started to run second. To something else. At least for one person in the family. They've started to put someone else first. Or something else first. Before the family. And so there's family strife.

And that is what Jesus expects. From you and I. He expects a loyalty to him. Which will surpass every other loyalty. That is what it means to follow Jesus.

It means to make him Lord. That's what it means to acknowledge God. As our spiritual father. To acknowledge Jesus Christ as king. That doesn't mean that a Christian.

[12 : 36] Will no longer take part of his family. Not at all. It will probably mean. That a Christian will take better care of the family. Than they ever did before. But it does mean. That they will make all their decisions. Every decision.

In the light of this one guiding principle. What does Jesus want? What does Jesus want? And that may mean.

That guiding principle means. That a family could be disgruntled. If not angry. Or hostile. And as I look around this room actually.

I can see that in some of your families. You know what that is like. You know that as you've put Jesus first. It has meant your family has been very disgruntled.

For a Christian. The overarching principle. The overarching principle. Can never be anything else. But what does Jesus want? You see.

[13 : 32] This is the intolerance of Jesus. Isn't it? The intolerance of Jesus. He is intolerant. Of his rivals. His intolerance.

Of running second. To some higher loyalty. An intolerance founded on who he is. And the lengths to which he's gone. To welcome people into his kingdom. It is an intolerance.

That Jesus has got every right to ask for. To exercise. But it's an intolerance. That means you and I. May be in conflict with our families.

So you see. When Jesus reflects upon his time. And upon why he came. Jesus sees that it's a time for judgment. A judgment that will begin with God's justice falling upon him.

But it's a judgment that will also separate all those who follow from those who don't. It's a judgment that will see the final verdict of God beginning to be felt in the here and now.

[14:32] Even in the most intimate context of family relationships. When Jesus came. The judgment of God came.

They were the times in which he lived. And then in verse 54. He turns to the second group. Second question. And he asks the crowd then. He says. What are the times that you live in like?

That's what he says to the crowd in front of him. What characterized their time. At the start of the new millennium. At the start of. You dot whatever it was. He asks them to think about the times they lived in.

What characterized those times. And he begins with an illustration about interpreting the weather. Look at verse 54. He also said to the crowd. When you see a cloud running in the west. You say. Once a shower is coming.

And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing. You say. There will be scorching heat. And it happens. Jesus was saying to them. You see. You're pretty good at predicting the weather.

[15:33] I went on the BBC website. To check the details for today. And at 11am. The weather is supposed to be dry. And overcast. It's not bad is it? It's not bad. I think they got it right.

We have a lot of technology to help us. But back then. They had a cloud there. And a wind here. But they were still able to predict the weather. With a high degree of accuracy.

But Jesus says. You may be able to interpret the weather. But you can't interpret the times. As a result. Jesus calls in verse 56. You hypocrites. You hypocrites. You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky.

But why do you not know how to interpret the present time? Jesus is suggesting. That just as there are signs. Which can reveal things about the weather. So too there are signs.

About. That reveal things. About what is going on in the world. There are signs. That reveal what the times are really like. The sad thing is that. These A grade meteorologists.

[16:31] Jesus was talking to. They were completely clueless. When it came to knowing what times they lived in. And so Jesus finishes this section. With a scenario. That is meant to give them a bit of a clue.

It's a scenario. That suggests to us. What Jesus himself thought the times are saying. Look at verse 57. And do you not judge for yourselves what is right. As you go with your accuser before the magistrate.

Make an effort to settle with him on the way. Lest he drag you to see the judge. And the judge hand you over to the officer. And the officer put you in prison. I tell you. You will never get out. Until he paid the very last penny.

In this last little story. Jesus asks the people to imagine somebody is suing them. And if they find themselves in that situation. They would be really smart. If they tried to sort it out.

Before it gets to the court. Because if they do go to court. And they lose. They are going to end up having to pay. And they may spend a very long time in jail. And what Jesus is saying.

[17:33] Well most of the commentators think it is a parable. It is a parable about being reconciled to God. Before his judgement comes upon you. And so they say this is a parable. Like the other parables in Luke.

And it is all about being reconciled to God. Before God judges you. I don't actually think that. I don't think verses 57 to 59. Read like a parable.

I don't think they read like the rest of the parables in Luke's gospel. In fact I think it is literal. It is a literal story. I say because it would be very unusual. For a parable about God's judgement.

To even entertain getting out from it. I don't see that anywhere else in the New Testament. These verses speak of in verse 49. Kind of getting out of judgement. I don't think that fits. And if you look at the parallel verses in Matthew's gospel.

Which seem to me to be very literal. When Matthew explains them. Rather than seeing verses 57 to 59 as a parable. It seems much more natural to me.

[18:30] To read it as if Jesus is giving you instructions. About what people should do. If they find themselves in this situation. And I think Jesus is saying something much more straightforward.

Something much more obvious.

It seems to me Jesus is saying. Time is short. Time is short. That's a clue. Jesus is giving them. This is how you interpret the times.

The time is short. And that is why they should be reconciled. With their adversary on the way to court. If they find themselves in that circumstance. Because the time is short.

It's too short. To find yourself spending days and months and years behind bars. There are far more important things to do. There isn't long before the justice of God comes once and for all.

And I think that is what Jesus is suggesting. He's already said in verses 49 and verse 50. That he's come to bring the fire of God's judgment. And now I think he's reminding them.

[19 : 30] There is a day coming when the judgment of God will bring the whole world to a standstill. And every man and every woman to their knees. And Jesus' presence among them.

Kindling that fire. Dividing people. Bringing the justice of God. Should be the only sign that they need. The fact that Jesus has come. And he's come to bring fire. He's judging people.

And he's dividing people. Is the only sign they need. And they should have been able to tell by listening to Jesus. And seeing what Jesus did. That the justice of God was coming.

They should have been able to tell the time was short. So what we see in these verses. Like in the previous section. Is their time. Was a time for judgment. And in these verses.

It's judgment in a different sense. Not God's judgment coming upon Jesus. But their judging. Look at how Jesus uses the word.

[20 : 29] Just slightly differently in verse 57. He says. And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? He says to them. Listen.

The time is short guys. And because the signs are all there. Jesus tells the crowd. This is the time for judging. Judge yourself. Judging in the sense of discerning.

Judging in the sense of interpreting the times. It was a time for judgment. And that they should have been saying. Well in my judgment. Considering the times. Seeing Jesus.

The time is short. And that's the kind of wise judgment. That they should have been exercising. But sadly they weren't.

They weren't doing that. And if they didn't heed Jesus' warning. They would find themselves falling on the wrong side. Of a very vicious irony. Because if they failed to exercise sound judgment.

[21 : 31] They would feel the full force. Of God's judgment. Well they were Jesus' stern words. To the people of his day. But what do they say to us.

2000 years later. What does it say to us. 2000 years later. How do they sharpen. Our view of the world in which we live. How do they help us see the times.

In which we live from God's perspective. And it seems to me. That Jesus would help us in two key ways. Because the words that Jesus added. Are still true aren't they. And still powerfully relevant.

In the first place. Jesus still divides. He still divides. Jesus is still the same. Controversial figure now.

As he was 2000 years ago. He's the same king now. Than he was then. Because he lives. And he reigns. And he still claims the allegiance.

[22 : 30] Of his followers. And Jesus is still intolerant. Gloriously intolerant. Of his rivals. And you will still find today. Families divided.

Divided because of Jesus. And in that sense. The final judgment of God. Is foreshadowed now. Some follow Jesus.

And love him. Others ignore him. And spurn him. Jesus still divides. But what is more.

Secondly. The time is still short. The time is still short. The judgment of God. Is still coming. God's plans haven't changed. The day is still coming.

When his justice. Will bring the whole earth. To a standstill. And every man. And woman. And boy and girl. To their knees. And if the signs.

[23 : 27] Were there in Jesus's day. And the time was short. Then. How much more now. Surely the time. Must be getting shorter. And we don't know the day.

And we don't know the hour. But God the Father does. And it is. Inevitably getting closer. And we must not allow. The passing of 2000 years.

To weaken our convictions. About that day. It is real. And it is coming. It is. And the time between that day.

And our days. Is much shorter than when it was. When Jesus warned. And rebuked those crowds. And so. This morning. We need to hear Jesus's warning.

Don't we. As well. Because the shortness of time. Ought to impact. The way we see the days. In which we live. In order to sharpen.

[24 : 28] Our perspective. Straight after this section. In Luke 12. Luke 13. Opens with Jesus being asked. About a question. About what disasters mean.

There is a disaster. That has happened. There is a tower. That has fallen over. And Jesus asked the question. What do these disasters mean? Do they mean. That those who were killed.

Were more guilty. Than those who survived. And Jesus' answer. Is an emphatic. No. But Jesus does say. It is just another sign. It is another reminder.

That time is. Short. And what is the implication. Of that? What is the implication. Of the shortness of time? He sums it up in a word.

Repentance. If the time is short. And the judgment of God. Is coming. And the world.

[25 : 23] Is full of signs. To that effect. Then what should we do? We should repent. Jesus' words. In verse 5. Of chapter 13. Are actually quite chilling. Aren't they?

Can you see them? Now I tell you. But unless you repent. You will all likewise perish. And given that Jesus.

Still invites today. People to come. And to be loyal to him. And given that the time. Is still short. And it's getting shorter. And then the need.

For people to repent. The need for people. To be reconciled to God. Is still urgent. Isn't it? In fact. It's getting more urgent. We saw that sense of urgency.

In our first reading. I don't know whether you picked it up. In 2 Corinthians 5. The Apostle Paul. Is awed. By the fact. He's amazed. By the fact. That God has entrusted. To him. The ministry of reconciliation.

[26 : 21] And so he pleads. With the Corinthians. We implore you. On Christ's behalf. Be reconciled. To God. And if it was urgent then.

How much more urgent is it now? How much more urgent is it now? That people who are in darkness see the light. How much more urgent is it that we prove to be faithful ambassadors.

As God makes his appeal through us. Through our lives. What are the times we live in like? Well one writer says. Unprecedented economic prosperity.

Times of safety. In a world of terror. But brothers and sisters. Don't be fooled. Don't be fooled. Because we in this city.

In our homes. In our jobs. And with our ability to spend. We're perhaps more fooled. Than at any other time. We live in the final days.

[27 : 29] The signs are still around us. As they were in Luke 12. And the word of God comes to you and I. With crystal clarity this morning. The time is short.

And with this shortness of time. Comes urgent priorities. Our repentance. Our turning from sin continually. And not just ours. But the repentance of those around us.

There is an urgent need. For people to find themselves. Reconciled with God. And these may seem like good days. In a lucky country.

It may seem that it's a time of safety. And wealth. But Jesus pleads with you this morning. To see through the fog.

And to know with a kind of. Agitation. If I can put it like that. That the time is short. It's my hope. And my prayer this morning. That Jesus. Could not address.

[28 : 28] Us the way. That he addresses. Those in his own generation. Do you look at verse 56 with me? You hypocrites.

You know how to interpret. The appearance of the earth. And the sky. You know how to tell the weather. But why do you not know. How to interpret the present time. Let's pray.