



Jesus has more faith in weather forecasters than I do. And, I suspect, he might have been speaking sarcastically. Someone said that being a weather forecaster is a great job because you can be wrong most of the time and still keep your job. Not true in other professions! In this as in so many other ways, Jesus speaks in words we know but sentences and sentiments we may not understand.

The picture of Jesus in today's Gospel is not one that we are particularly comfortable with.

It shows us the human side of Jesus: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be

baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three..."

Now how does Jesus being under stress – Jesus coming to bring fire to the earth- fit with our theology that Jesus comes to redeem the world and each of us? How does this statement of Jesus as one bringing division work with our belief that Jesus comes to redeem, to heal and to bring unity?

Jesus, as well as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, reminds us that faith – belief in God- does not automatically mean that our life is easy or our life has no problems to be solved or our life does not have divisions in it. The beginning of Hebrews Chapter 11, verses 1 and 6, are probably familiar to you:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ...And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

And then the writer goes on to point out the relationship between God and Noah, between God and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and other forebears that would have been known to the community that received the letter. This section of Hebrews is intended to help us grow in our faith and thus grow in our trust and love of God, even as the world intervenes in ways that seek division.

Almost everyone here can think of some situation in your own life – personal or business- where division exists because we hold different views. Sometimes the reason for the difference is relatively small and we can let our differences exist without disrupting the relationship.

Sometimes the differences touch our core values. Divisions then can run deep and hurt incredibly. Sometimes we deal with those differences by agreeing not to talk about them and we get along, although we are always at least subconsciously aware of the boundaries: don't bring

up politics with Uncle Sam because it will start a fight. Or don't bring up religion because Aunt Mildred has views that directly oppose yours. An uneasy truce to preserve family peace. Sometimes it's a bit like the owner of the vineyard who planted grapes and ended up with sour grapes. Not quite what was expected or hoped for and now uncertain about what to do.

Our collect reminds us to look to Jesus as an example of one who lived a godly life and we pray that we might receive, gracefully, the redeeming work Jesus did.

What is a godly life? Hebrews lists the heroes of the faith- those who put their life on the line to follow God even though it might prove costly. When Hebrews was written, the names of the heroes and their stories were widely known- just mention the name Gideon and people knew: "Oh, he's the one that circled Jericho for 7 days with horns blowing and the walls came down." Or Rahab: "Oh, she's the prostitute that hid the Israelite spies at the risk of her own life." Or David: "Oh, he's the one who killed the giant Goliath."

Nice stories and each of them stands for the proposition that they were people willing to follow God even when it might mean their own life. They were willing to put God at the center of their life even when it caused division.

Being human beings, though, not all of these heroes were consistent in their behavior throughout the life. Just like us. David is the prime example of being favored by God but giving in to human temptation and sin. Bathsheba is a name that comes down to us as the woman David lusted after and the one led to David's ordering the killing of Bathsheba's husband so that David could take her to wife. David desired to follow God but often fell short. Despite his failures, God still loved David.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6). Jesus shows us by his life how we are to live. And if we live following the example of Jesus, we will know the truth of a right relationship with God. And if we have a right relationship with God, we will have everlasting life.

Because we are human, we cannot know the mind of God. We do not always agree on what is meant by the Way, the Truth and the Life. We find ourselves disagreeing with our neighbor about how to live. Divisions exist between father and son, between mother and daughter, between friends.

Or we live a life which follows Jesus and we still have suffering or loss. Hebrews reminds us that even when life is full of pain and loss, that "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..."

Faith often requires endurance, determination, patience, kindness, self-effacing behavior, and strength in the face of challenge and unfairness by the world's standards.

Faith calls us to “do the right thing” even when it would be easy to walk away and consider only our own needs.

On September 11, 2001, following the attacks on the World Trade Center, the FAA ordered all flights grounded. Flights were diverted to the closest airport, whether or not that was the original destination of the flight.

Herb Kelleher, then Chair of Southwest Airlines, tells this story: One of their flights was told to land in Grand Rapids, MI. Now Southwest does not ordinarily fly to Grand Rapids so that flight was dependent upon the good will of ground personnel for other airlines to help guide the plane to a gate and then to unload people and baggage. No one had talked about what would happen next, though.

As it turned out, the ground stop was only for aircraft and so buses and trains were available as well as rental cars. After awhile, people had found a way to find their way home. That is, all but 22 people who had no funds to rent a car or buy a bus or train ticket. What to do- leave them stranded in Grand Rapids for however long it took? Remember on that day we had no idea if the ground stop and other measures would last a day, a week or even longer.

The captain of that flight, when informed of the plight of the 22 passengers took out his wallet and paid for train tickets. The captain had no legal obligation to pay for the train tickets for those 22 passengers out of his own funds. He had an ethical and moral obligation however, as he saw it, to care for those who were not as fortunate as he was at that moment.

It would have been easy to walk away – and let division exist between those who had funds and bought their own tickets- and those who would otherwise have been stuck in Grand Rapids for who knows how long. The one act of a pilot brought incredible good will, I imagine. Who knows the ripples from that act in the lives of the 22 or the lives of others who witnessed this gift. Who knows what other rifts or divisions might have been resolved because one man was willing to dig deep into his own pocket that others could be reunited with their loved ones at a time when the world was crashing down.

Jesus would have smiled, I think, to see that pilot recognize the potential for division and grief and for being willing to put others first. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who urge us on to run the race with perseverance when it would be so easy to simply give up and let the world's value drive our actions. Look to Jesus as the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith. Amen.