

No Nails Christianity?!

Jeremiah 23²³⁻²⁹; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11^{29-12²}; Luke 12⁴⁹⁻⁵⁶

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. [Hebrews 12¹]

Anyone trained in preaching from the 1960's to the 1990's will have the commentaries of William Barclay on their shelves: this Scots academic from Glasgow wrote a commentary on every word in the New Testament and, when there is a pressure to get a sermon out or you don't have a clue what is being said in a text, Barclay is a good place to start.

On the Gospel passage for today Barclay says: *However much we may wish to eliminate the element of judgement from the message of Jesus it remains stubbornly and unalterably there.*

There isn't a 'no-nails' version of Christianity, or *Christianity-Lite* where we can avoid this message! Those looking for a light and frothy summer sermon today won't find it in these readings:

- ✦ The reading from Jeremiah states that God is close and that there is no possibility of hiding from him and God says **is not my word fire** and goes on to say that it is **like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces.**
- ✦ The Psalmist gives us an image of God as the Presiding Judge in the midst of the Supreme Court pursuing justice for those who cannot secure it for themselves. Being mortal, by definition, is a terminal condition.
- ✦ Hebrews extolls the people of faith - but doesn't shrink away from mentioning the cost of being a disciple: certainly the Hebrews in the Exodus; the people besieging Jericho (with specific mention of Rahab the Prostitute); Gideon; Barak; Sampson; Jephtha; David; and Samuel **through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fires, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness and put foreign armies to flight.** But Hebrews continues that some people, even whilst holding that same faith, stating that **others were tortured, refusing to accept release... others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in**

skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented. Faith didn't divide these two groups - it united them.

- ✦ I love the visual imagery of Hebrews 12¹ - **Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses!** I imagine every Christian who has ever worshipped on this site for the 1000 years of its history here with us is spirit, pushing the angels out of the way to be part of our worship. But we should not lose sight of how costly this is - the Greek word for witness is *martus* from which we get the English word *martyr*: one who bears witness not only by using words, but by their example and even by their death. In these days of the Olympic games, it is this imagery that is in the authors mind: of wanting that gold medal so much that everything is sacrificed to get it. That is what Jesus did for love of us - **who for the joy that set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame.** We aren't called to enjoy the spiritual scenery of witnesses, but to look with them **to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.**
- ✦ In that light Luke's record of Jesus' words does make sense. That sort of commitment to Jesus does split families and it does split communities. Such is the weight of the responsibility that Jesus says it feels like being immersed as in baptism; Jesus even admits to having the modern malady of **stress!** The **peace** that Jesus is to bring is not a superficial acceptance of other people, it is a peace based on the fundamental conviction that our allegiance to Jesus is more vital and more compelling than any other relationship. **Division** is inevitable if families and communities are not united around Christ.
- ✦ All of this is set in the context of judgement - that is what Luke's record of Jesus referring to **fire** is about as is his accusation that the crowd could interpret the sky of the weather but not the signs of the times.

What sort of God would we have if he could make no demands and who did not command worship and obedience?

What sort of faith would we have if it cost us nothing and we could do whatever we liked?

No-nails might be good for sticking boiler-suits to billboards (you may remember the adverts) but discipleship is about the real thing and that is worthwhile.