

## **Sermon / Kauwhau given at Service of Worship on Sunday 17 August 2025, led by Graham Redding, at Knox Church Ōtepoti Dunedin New Zealand**

**Text:** Luke 12:49–56; Hebrews 11:29–12:2

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Luke 12:49)

In an age where many people turn to spirituality for serenity, tranquility, and inner peace, these words from Jesus are deeply unsettling. They disrupt our assumptions about who Jesus is and what faith looks like. They seem to stand in stark contrast to the image of Jesus as the Prince of Peace, the one who stills storms and calms troubled hearts.

Luke’s Gospel does not sanitise Jesus’ mission. It presents us with a Christ who is prophetic and confrontational. The peace he brings is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice, truth, and transformation.

The Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us that living by faith is not a gentle walk through the park. It is a long-distance race, requiring endurance, courage, and focus. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses—people who lived in turbulent times, trusted God amidst trials and tribulations, and walked paths marked by a suffering faith.

Together, these texts challenge us to consider a disruptive, enduring, and hope-filled type of faith—one that refuses to settle for shallow peace or easy answers.

Luke 12:49–56 is part of Jesus’ long journey to Jerusalem, a journey that began when he “set his face” toward the city (Luke 9:51). This is no leisurely pilgrimage. The road is steeped in confrontation and anticipation, as Jesus steadily approaches rejection, suffering, and crucifixion.

The passage begins with a reference to fire—not a fire that destroys, but a fire that refines. Jesus longs to see that fire kindled on the earth: a fire that purifies, that awakens, that confronts apathy and injustice. The fire of the prophets, the fire of Pentecost, the fire that births a new creation.

Then Jesus says, “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!”

What does he mean? What is this baptism to which Jesus refers? Hadn’t he already been baptized in the river Jordan?

Yes, Jesus had already entered the waters of the Jordan. That moment—at the beginning of his ministry—was his first public act. Crowds flocked to see John the Baptist in the wilderness seeking a fresh start, confessing their failures, hoping to be washed clean.

And into that water steps Jesus, the One with no sins to confess.

Why does the One who is without sin undergo a baptism for the repentance of sins?

In the Gospels, Jesus' baptism at the hands of John the Baptist is presented vicariously. He is baptized in our place and on our behalf in an act of radical solidarity with the burdened, the lost, the longing. He steps into the same water as the rest of us, saying in effect: "Where you go, I will go. What you carry, I will carry. What you long for, I will fulfil."

Jesus was baptized in our place, not because he needed cleansing, but because we do. And now, on the road to Jerusalem, he speaks of another baptism on our behalf. Not of water, but of fire. The cross looms. This is the baptism of suffering, the giving of his life. And once again—it is for us. This is love that does not flinch. Love that does not retaliate. Love that takes the world's brokenness and heals it with mercy.

Luke would have us understand that both baptisms—in the river Jordan and on the Cross at Calvary—belong together. They are two parts of a single mission. A mission that is not just for religious insiders, not restricted to the devout—the pharisees and scribes and their modern equivalents. It is for every human being: the faithful and the faltering, the despairing and the defiant, the religious and the skeptical.

Too often, the church has treated baptism like a badge of membership, a sign that someone has joined the church, crossed the line, become "one of us." But that is far too small.

Baptism isn't about signing up to a religious club or ticking a spiritual box. It's about beginning a new kind of life—a life shaped by the example and love of Jesus. A life where kindness, justice, and grace aren't nice ideas, but actual priorities. A life that doesn't turn away from suffering or injustice, but steps into hard places—like Jesus did—with courage, hope, and compassion.

When we are baptized, we are joined not only to Christ but to his baptismal mission—his journey through water and fire, his embrace of a world that desperately needs healing.

We do not baptize to draw lines between insiders and outsiders, the baptized and the unbaptized. We baptize to join Jesus in the work of new creation.

The fire that Jesus came to kindle is not a spiritual warmth kind of fire. It is not the glow of candles or inner tranquillity. It is the fire of truth, of justice, of transformation. And in every age, that fire is kindled by people willing to speak out, stand up, and bear the cost of telling the truth.

One such person was **Anas al-Sharif**, an Al Jazeera journalist killed in Gaza on August 10, in what appears to have been a targeted assassination. He was among the last voices reporting from within Gaza, offering the world unfiltered accounts of its suffering. In a message he had prepared in case of his death, he wrote: "I have lived through pain in all its details, tasted suffering and loss many times, yet I never once hesitated to convey the truth as it is, without distortion or falsification – so that Allah may bear witness against those who stayed silent, those who accepted our killing, those who choked our breath, and whose hearts were unmoved by the scattered remains of our children and women,

doing nothing to stop the massacre that our people have faced for more than a year and a half.”

Al-Sharif’s courage to speak the truth, even at great personal risk, reflects the kind of prophetic fire Jesus longed to see kindled—a fire that will not be extinguished by fear or intimidation.

Sometimes we assume that such people—prophets, in the biblical sense—will be found in churches, pulpits, or religious institutions. But Jesus warned us not to be so narrow. In his own day, the religious elite often missed the signs, while outsiders—tax collectors, women, foreigners—saw with greater clarity.

So today, the people who confront injustice, stir conscience, and bear witness to truth are often found outside the Church as much as in it. The Spirit moves where the Spirit will. And those who carry the fire to which Jesus alludes may not always carry his name. Anas al-Sharif was one such person.

Let me name four examples from our own New Zealand context—four very different examples that reflect the sort of courageous, justice-oriented fire that Jesus spoke of.

**Nicky Hager** is an investigative journalist and author based in Wellington, whose work has consistently given voice to hidden truths behind some of our most respected institutions. He has published seven influential books exposing state surveillance, political manipulation, military wrongdoing, and the shadowy forces behind public discourse. He has endured lawsuits, police raids, and vilification for his work, but has never wavered in his quiet, principled commitment to truth and accountability. He is one of just two New Zealand members on the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists; and in June 2023 he was appointed an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to investigative journalism. Though not religious (as far as I know), Hager’s vocation bears the hallmarks of prophetic fire: a refusal to look away, and a deep concern for justice, transparency, and human dignity.

**Mike Smith**, a Māori activist affiliated with Ngāpuhi and Ngāti Kahu, brings that same fire in a different form. A veteran of environmental and indigenous rights campaigns, he gained national attention in the 1990s when he protested the colonial symbolism of One Tree Hill by attacking its lone exotic tree. More recently, he has taken on some of the most powerful polluters in Aotearoa through a landmark legal challenge—*Smith v Fonterra*—alleging that their emissions are causing damage to the climate, to Māori land, and to the wellbeing of future generations. What makes his stand unique is that it is rooted not only in western law, but in tikanga Māori—in the ancient values of kaitiakitanga (guardianship) and intergenerational responsibility. His is a voice of moral clarity and courage, calling the nation to account. His activism reflects the refining fire of Christ—love that is fierce, unyielding, and committed to the restoration of creation.

**Maggie Wilkinson** is a tireless advocate for the thousands of women in Aotearoa whose babies were taken—often forcibly—under the 1955 Adoption Act. For decades, these mothers lived in silence and stigma, their grief invisible to the wider public. Through personal testimony, community organising, and sustained political advocacy, Maggie has

helped expose this hidden history and pressed for national acknowledgement and redress. Her campaign burns with the fire of truth-telling and compassion. Though carried out beyond the structures of the church, her witness aligns deeply with the Gospel's call to remember the forgotten, to honour the wounded, and to lift up those who have been shamed and silenced.

**The Ihumātao protestors**, led by young Māori women and activists, occupied sacred land threatened by commercial development. Their nonviolent stand reminded the nation that land is not just property—it is whakapapa, memory, and identity. Their occupation was not just political; it was spiritual. They lit a fire in the public square, calling us to honour the past, confront injustice, and seek reconciliation rooted in truth. Their courage calls the church, too, to ask whose voices we hear, whose stories we honour, and what it means to stand on sacred ground.

These are modern-day witnesses. Their language may not be religious, but their witness is prophetic. They show us that God's refining fire is not confined to the Church. It kindles wherever courage and conscience meet.

We are called to join them. To run the race with perseverance. To set aside the weight of respectability, fear, or complacency.

Faith, thus understood, is not passive. It is not merely personal. It is public, persevering, and at times disruptive. It enters the water with the world's pain. It walks through the fire of costly commitment to justice. It does not flinch at division, because it is committed to truth and reconciliation.

Let us not settle for a faith that only soothes us. Let us embrace the fire that refines us. Let us listen to Jesus, who calls us to discern the times, take up our cross, and follow him.

May we be people who: - Burn with prophetic compassion - Endure with the strength of the saints - And fix our eyes on the One who runs ahead of us.

This is not the peace the world gives. It is deeper, truer, harder—and more beautiful.

## **Knox Presbyterian Church, Ōtepoti Dunedin**

*Our vision is to see the reign of God, made known in Jesus, have a transformative effect on people's lives and on the world in which we live.*



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