

St Brandon's, Sermon for 18th August 2019. Jeremiah 23.23-29 Luke 12:49-56

Division

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I am very glad today is not a baptism: at least we here today are largely 'regulars' with some broader experience of reading scripture. It feels as though Jesus has just crashed into the room in an uncharacteristically bad mood and turned upside down what we thought we were meant to be doing:

"Its [V] Peace, Man!" "Luuuve." ...

"What? Not peace? Division?"

This is one of these uncomfortable passages that remind us that Christians are called not to live and let live, but to follow, and encounter the challenges: *'We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh no! We've got to go through it!'*, as another preacher recently quoted from *'Going on a Bear Hunt.'*

Jesus may be sounding shocking but he's not being inconsistent: what he is saying is able to be reconciled with the two great commandments. The first commandment is

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

The second is *'Love your neighbour as yourself.'*

There is nothing in this gospel passage about not loving.

This passage is challenging us about our priorities.

It is continuing the themes we've had in recent Sundays about our distractions and values, our watchfulness and stewardship. We've been warned of the danger of material riches over being 'rich towards God', cautioned against undue striving for things of this world that take us away from God; of the need to stay alert even if there is a delay in Jesus' second coming. And this passage is more of the same.

Our priority is to love God, second, our neighbour. Doing that doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't love our families. It does mean that we have to take great care to watch ourselves if and when a conflict of interest arises.

If today's passage leaves us in any doubt that God wants us to love our families, we need only look at the language of the Godhead, expressed as the Holy Family, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'

The fact that Jesus was born into an identifiable family – Mary, Joseph, brothers and sisters – a loving and stable family that nurtured the child Jesus. But bigger than that, within that, and over and above that, the child Jesus identifies God as his true Father.

That is the model we are given.
In, through, and above all, love God.

Family is the starting point for Jesus for the working out of loving human relationship: the image and reflection of the trinity. He doesn't stop though, at the nuclear family but points to that loving relationship being fully realised when it is extended upwards – to the Father, and outwards to neighbour, and beyond.

Jesus knew his disciples were going to have a difficult time as he approached the fulfilment of his time on earth, and all that would follow. That they would be potentially at odds with many fellow Jews, and yes, even members of their own family.

Even Jesus had not avoided being at odds with his own family: in John, chapter 5, we read '*For not even his brothers believed in him*'.

That same difficulty goes on recurring down the generations wherever there is a difference of opinion on faith and the outworking of following Christ.

On matters of justice and mercy.

On matters of wealth and priorities.

Every and any matter that compromises the ability of the Christian to follow those two great commandments creates a tension and conflict of interests for that person. It shows up, to the Christian, at least, where they are, perhaps, divided from their family in their attitudes and actions: set apart – called to stand aside – to do differently.

How we choose to respond to the prompting to be different is part of our calling as well.

We are called to love God and neighbour, when that causes a division of interest in our family, it does not have to mean that it results in loss of love or does damage to the relationship.

We can't be excused the division, that is a result of being called but we can be accountable as to how we handle that difference.

At its best, recent Archbishops – and I'm thinking here of Archbishops Rowan Williams and Justin Welby – have shown us how keeping respectful, open listening and conversation with those of different persuasions in the family of the Anglican Communion has enabled the damage, potentially, of splitting and dis-unity to be avoided.

We can choose to act similarly, honouring our primary calling to love God but not failing, as best we can, to love family. Taking on ourselves the slower, discerning, perhaps more painful route of loving even in the pain of divisive matters.

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What happens when we go wider with that challenge: when we extend loving family to Jesus' definition of family?

'He was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." But he said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.' (Luke 8 v. 20, 21).

What happens when we extend outwards to loving our neighbour as ourselves, in matters of division?

The complexity increases, many more defences arise in us around the notion of 'other', of alienation and isolation: who are they? And helplessness in the scale of the notion.

But is it actually harder? We are not asked to personally save the planet, we are asked to make good and loving choices each time we respond, knowing honestly what our capacity is and what our choices are. We are asked to choose to align ourselves with the work of God, as best we can follow it, loving God above all, and loving our neighbour, and thus will **God** save the planet.

I wonder if some of our ability to choose freely and well in our response to neighbour and need - to loving and sharing the good news - is founded in the way we have dealt with those divisions in family?

I wonder if the voices we have been brought up with are the ones we would choose to listen to in our mature lives or have assimilated in an unfiltered way?

Do we allow our family's culture, whatever that might look like: the attitudes and prejudices – good or bad – that we carry with us from our childhood and later, do we allow that culture to shape us still, without reviewing whether those influence on us are for better or worse?

Do we challenge, or do we collude with 'the way we do it in our family', where we detect ourselves being uncomfortable with a prevailing, negative attitude? Do we accept it for the sake of peace, the kind of peace that is a quiet life rather than the real peace of Christ's love filling us?

In the wider context of interacting with our society, do we jump on bandwagons too readily, or not readily enough?

Who are the voices we follow in the media?

How 'on-side' should we be?

Jeremiah's warning to us in the Old Testament reading was to listening for the distinction between those who speak a message consistent with the authority of God, and those who tag God's name onto whatever of their own agenda, their own dream.

How wonderful it would be to have the second sight that shows us the difference!

But at least if we attend to the niggles that warn us, when it does, to separate ourselves from a cause - a false prophet - we can be attentive and make that division. Practising attending to that niggles, taking seriously the call to join bringing in God's rule of Kingdom values, is the start of learning *how to interpret the present time*, and act accordingly.

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Jesus says to his disciples "*Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*"

Our faith perspective may call us to stand in a different place, seeing a different view of the landscape from those we associate with, (here, I'm widening family to include whoever is relevant to each of us – work colleagues, social media circles, and so on), that is the call to be divided, to see ourselves in a different place, set apart by faith.

If, we can stand true to what we believe we are called to be for Christ, showing that in our lives, by the grace of God, we may make a difference: first within and then increasingly beyond, those we might call family.

Even if we can't change them, we will be changed, to be more sure of where we stand, and what we see, and who we serve.

I remember visiting an engineering works in Gateshead where they were using water to cut very thick steel sheet. The jet was under huge pressure and very precisely aimed but it was only water!

I see God's love in us like that water, capable of cutting through, of re-shaping and transforming seemingly impossibly strong differences that divide us.

Let's finish by praying: Lord help us to see, and transform with your love, those things that divide us and those we are ready to name as our family, so, one day, we may all be united as your children. *Amen*