

**SERMON AT YORK: 16/8/98: GEOFF CHADWICK: 11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST OS 20: Lk 12:49-59: "FIGHTING"**

Jesus said: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!... 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; they will be divided... (Lk 12:49-53, NRSV).

This is a very difficult passage for us to hear and understand. For many of us we tend to think of Jesus as the "Prince of Peace" yet here he is saying that fire and division will be brought by him. How do we reconcile this statement with our understanding of Christians as peace makers? Well firstly, I think this is a statement based on reality. Jesus is well aware that the message of his Gospel is one which will bring about hostility. Jesus' message that God loves all, that the outcasts of society are to be loved, and that the legalistic trappings of religion are of little importance was sure to upset many people. In fact enough were upset to crucify him. The action of crucifixion was anything but an act of peace. It was an act of sheer violence designed to bring division amongst his followers.

Secondly, we know that the early church was anything but peaceful. Paul's letters are enough to convince anyone of the bitterness of the fights fought between different factions of the new Christian religion.

Thirdly, we know that the first Christians were tortured and killed for their faith. Family members did hand to the authorities for torture other family members who had converted to Christianity. We also know that the Romans executed anyone with bread in their possession on a Sunday morning. The Catacombs in Rome bear witness to the extremity of early church persecution.

So, Jesus is very real about the radical nature of his message. His message of peace and reconciliation between God and humankind was enough to bring war between zealots of all kinds.

It is interesting to note that the Early Church dealt with this war by insisting that its members be pacifists. Fragments of early baptism services indicate promises of pacifism and either never to join an army or to desert if you were a soldier. It is not until the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity in the 4th Century AD that Christians could be soldiers. Curiously the emperor insisted that all of his soldiers be baptised into the Christian faith by marching them through rivers. One wonders if this was an act of faith or an act of political expediency!

So the early Christians were pacifists for the Prince of Peace who claimed that he would bring about division. Does this pacifism mean that they did not fight? Certainly not, it was through their pacifism that the best fighting for the Gospel was done. This was no mere passive pacifism, it was an active one that brought about a change in the Empire.

I wonder if you know the Movie Ghandi. This is Attenborough's masterful depiction of the life of Mahatma Ghandi. (If you have not seen it please do, but be prepared for a long sitting). Mahatma Ghandi was a champion of those who sought independence from British rule in India. His method was that of active pacifism. In one section of the movie we see this portrayed in the most graphic of ways.

The Indian people carrying no weapons, march in line on a British Garrison. Each line marched to the garrison and stopped only to be beaten down with truncheons. As each line marched forward and was beaten down the women carried the injured off to their first aid posts set up alongside the road. Not one British soldier was struck, but the British government was struck hard. It was condemned for its violence and shamed into withdrawing from India. The Indian people had fought well, but had committed no violence.

(To be fair the dream of Ghandi for non violent activism in India has failed to really eventuate).

This example, I think is perhaps the closest modern day example we have of the type of fighting done by the pacifist Christians of the early Church. Their pacifism was not one of mere passivity but one where the injustices of the world were not tolerated. Christians, I think, are allowed to fight but the means are always meant to be within the confines of justice and God's love.

Fighting, it seems is a paradox within the Christian faith. On the one hand we condemn violence but on the other our faith has perpetrated much. Just wars have always been acceptable to us except that defining what is just is rather slippery. Even so I think we have a responsibility to fight for Justice but we must not ever allow our ends to justify our means. It is the courage of Jesus facing the cross that compels us to engage in a war of peace. We fight that there be no fighting.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**