

Sunday Between 19<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> June [12]

Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus said, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword".

These are not the comfortable words of gentle Jesus meek and mild this is the Jesus who seeks the kingdom of God first and foremost, who thirsts for justice and will let nothing stand in his way. This is confronting Jesus who asks us to consider whether or not we are really his.

Well we are here aren't we? We are worshipping him, we are listening to scripture, we are doing everything right aren't we? As far as the world is concerned this is what we do. As Christians we get together on a weekly basis to worship and sing and pray together. Scientific study tells us that we live longer and healthier on average but the scientist would go one to attribute that to simply what happens when people have good support networks, and churches certainly fall into that category.

Many people out there, amongst them friends and family perhaps of all of us, are unwilling to make this commitment, they sometimes do not believe in God, sometimes they do but see no need to be a part of his Church in order to honour him. Still others are spiritual and cannot pin down their beliefs to a religion or tradition.

But their lack of commitment is set alongside our level of commitment in this morning's gospel reading as we are told that it is not enough to believe quietly in our own safe way, but rather we must care more for God than we care for family, we must acknowledge Jesus before those who would make our lives a misery for doing so, we must be willing to put our very lives at risk if we are to keep our souls safe.

These are really difficult words. We can be forgiven for thinking perhaps that they don't really apply to us. We are willing to tell people that we are Christians, we do put God first, we recognise that our earthly lives are nothing compared with our hope of life ever after in the presence of God. Now before you self-examine, let's be clear, putting God first is not the same as putting the Church first. We love all that you do within this community as a response to God's love for you and we wouldn't do very well if it all stopped, but let us not think that missing a service to care for a sick relative is going to lead to eternal damnation. Separate those two things in your mind, God and the Church, if you can, because they are two very different things.

It is true that we do not live in circumstances that cause us to put our lives on the line for our faith and its always easier to say what we would do if faced with difficulty when we know that we are unlikely to ever face it. But let us not be fooled into thinking that in this world today this portion of scripture isn't being lived out over and over again.

Consider the news, we don't have to look very far to find reports of Christians being persecuted somewhere in the world. And if there isn't a big story currently being played out in the news cycle, visit the information website for the Barnabas Fund, a charity that acts for persecuted Christians worldwide, and you will find no shortage of inspiration. Christians all over the world are refusing to turn their backs on their faith despite the risk it places on their lives and the lives of those they love.

Here in Australia we are surrounded by very loud voices who tell us that religion has no place in public life. They don't want the Lord's prayer used in parliament, they don't want chaplains in schools, they don't want even the option of religion taught in tax funded schools. We are very good at discussing amongst ourselves what a shame that is, but are we willing to speak up. Jesus tells us, what we hear from him in the darkness we must repeat in broad daylight, what we hear whispered we must shout from the rooftops. The opportunities are there for us to do that, are we willing to act on them?

The reality is we don't like conflict, it is easier to nod and smile when faced with a strongly opinionated person whether we agree with them or not. We are facing a similar situation in today's world. As a group Christians we are at risk of being edged out of public view and if we are not careful we can be complicit in allowing it to happen. We know that we can worship quietly and serve God quietly, and there is even a biblical precedent that we should commune with God in secret and not for the purpose of attracting attention.

And yet, there must be a balance where we are also willing to share our faith, and do so bravely even if we find it scary. That is what Jesus asks of us this morning. He asks us to speak up for him, to acknowledge him before others as he acknowledges us before the Father. He asks us to put aside what others think of us, and in doing so he reminds us that this is not a new problem. Jesus teaches on this subject because there were people around him who found it hard to speak up and admit they were Christians. We may not be putting our lives on the line when we do it but make no mistake, some people will look at us in a new way.

Nicky Gumbel, the Alpha Course founder, speaks of the difficulties people have when their friends and family become Christians, it makes relationships difficult at times, but it is worth it to begin that incredible relationship we are offered by God.

We are left today with a question to ponder. Are we following Jesus' teaching in the way we live out our faith. Are we truly putting God first in our lives, or put it another way, if we were in a place where it was illegal to be a Christian, could the authorities find enough evidence to convict us?