

Sunday between 14th and 20th August [20]

Luke 12:49-59

How often do we catch part of a story and completely misunderstand the meaning? What about newspaper headlines, have you ever read one, been drawn in to read the entire article only to find that the story was quite different to the impression given by the headline? The reality of reading scripture each Sunday is that we are often in danger of misreading a message because what we hear is out of context, and that is a real issue today.

In today's gospel reading we have joined a conversation part way through and the message coming from Jesus seems to be very different from his usual teaching. No talk of unity today, no turning the other cheek or loving our enemies, rather Jesus states in no uncertain terms that he has come to bring division, to shake things up and to bring violence not peace at all. Had a newspaper journalist been listening in to this conversation one can only imagine that the headline would be something like, Prince of Peace, I think not! It would be an exclusive, the one person who was telling everyone else to be peacemakers, was himself planning and plotting violence. Wouldn't the religious establishment have loved to have this type of evidence against Jesus?

But, like with everything we read or hear second hand, we must be mindful of the context. In this case we have been reading over the past few weeks parts of the same encounter as detailed in Luke chapter 12, Jesus is with his disciples and he has been followed by a crowd. The crowd have become a bit boisterous, trampling each other in their eagerness to get to Jesus. Like lost and disoriented lambs, they see Jesus, like a shepherd, as a person of safety and they want to be close to him, but in the process they are putting others at risk. In the midst of this crowd we are told of a number of people who speak to Jesus of particular issues, you may remember from the other week the man who felt his brother ought to share their father's inheritance and wanted Jesus to be the judge. Jesus addresses the crowd in response to questions, but importantly, this chapter also details Jesus speaking directly to the disciples, at one point they ask, is this teaching for everyone or just for us. There was a definite difference between what Jesus was preaching to a large group of followers who included supporters and enemies alike, and what he was sharing with an intimate group who knew him well.

The first part of the gospel reading was shared with the disciples, he tells his closest followers something perhaps he would not have wanted to share with the larger group, and that was the inevitability of conflict over his message. Jesus was stating the reality of his mission, it was not going to be without opposition and there would, necessarily be conflict as some came to believe in him and others did not. In pointing out that the divisions would exist within even close family groups, Jesus is sharing the fact that those who come to faith will not be predictable based on age, gender, family group, status, but even within households some people will hear, accept and receive the good news and others will not. Now this is both troubling for us who would love to share our faith and see the result of our sharing as our friends and family commit to Christ, but it is also reassuring that from the very beginning this was anticipated, not everyone is ready at the same time, not everyone makes it there at all, but we are not responsible for that, we have a calling to share through word and deed our faith, but we are not called to force it on others, it's not possible anyway, faith comes by grace, not logic or threat.

But then Jesus speaks to the crowd, it is stated specifically in the verse that the focus of his attention shifts, and he challenges them to make a decision. "You can work out the weather, something you can't control, but you can't work out that times are changing", he says. "You look for an easy way out of your problems, stop it! Judge for yourself what's right, stop following blindly what others would have you do", he adds, probably as a further response to the inheritance question. Sort out your differences, don't leave it to another, do the right thing yourself.

Jesus tells his disciples and the crowd the same thing in 2 different ways, it's not easy, life is not easy. You can't listen to someone talk for a while, grab a few soundbites and get it all sorted, it doesn't work like that. If you want life, lived to the full you have to engage with it. That's what Jesus is urging us to understand today, if you want to live a life of faith, stand up for it, even if the people around you disagree, look for God's hand at work around you, recognise it and join in with it, even if it's where you least expect it. And don't expect someone else to do all this stuff for you, stop relying on rules and regulations to justify your actions, that was Jesus' rebuke to the Pharisees but it could just as easily be directed at us sometimes. Don't hide behind tradition and rules and doctrine, judge for yourself what needs to be done and use the law of love as your benchmark.

In the epistle we just heard from a letter to Hebrews, it is no accident that the writer urges the church to run with perseverance the race set before them, this Christian also knew that life is not easy, being a follower of Christ doesn't get us off the hook from the same stuff everyone else has to deal with, why would it? As Jesus said, for God makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Being a follower of Christ gives us a particular gift of support through our journey, the gift of prayer and the encouragement of scripture, the example of the saints who have gone before us and the indwelling of the spirit of God, but it's still going to rain!

There is no need, then, to fear the words of Jesus, the division he brings is not a violent act but a consequence of living in a world where we are free to reject as well as accept God's grace, it is a painful consequence, but unavoidable. Yet amongst it we are equipped with what we need to persevere. We need only keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, pioneer and perfecter of our faith to maintain the bigger picture, the context in which all that we face in life, good and bad, finds its place.

May God bless us this week with patience and perseverance, but also confidence and wisdom to be who we are, a vital part of Christ's body, and live lives faithful to our calling.