

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Second Sunday after Pentecost Yr A 2 June 2014

Track 1: Genesis 21.8-21 Psalm 86.1-10 Romans 6.1-11 Matthew 10.24-39

How do you feel when you watch the television news? Or read about our political life just now, in the state and in Australia? The world is in upheaval in so many – no, too many – places. Millions of innocent people find their towns, their cities, their homes are no longer safe and so they take flight with their children to somewhere they hope will be. Imagine it: grabbing your passport, the cards to access the bank in case there is money left, maybe taking a few precious things, surely some extra clothing, and with just what can be carried or stuffed into the car heading off, leaving the rest of your possessions – the comforts of a lifetime's work - and fleeing for life itself. It is painful to put ourselves in others' situation and imagine its reality, isn't it?

Consider our parliaments and governments! Way too little real debate and lots of sloganeering, policy without evidence of the need, a harsh even punitive spirit in many decisions, and fewer people of real substance and visionary character being elected.

It seems that courtesy and civility are disappearing from the public square. People who are opposed to religion are more and more openly hostile to the churches. Christian education in schools, and school chaplains in state schools have come under fire in the last couple of years in a way we never expected. The tragedy of that is that some Christians have so disrespected the protocols around involvement in schools that they have played right into the hands of our opponents.

It can feel as if everything our faith stands for is under threat at home and ancient and ethnic hatreds are intractable problems in the wider world. None of this commends the good news to our world.

And here we are this morning, hearing Jesus say – so it seems – that even he wants to escalate division and rejection right in the heart of family life. Some people wrongly use these words of Jesus to justify violence in Jesus' name, but that is not Jesus' purpose at all. Remember Jesus' earlier saying in the collection we call the 'Beatitudes': 'blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God' (Matt 5.9). There it is quite clear that although perfect peace will only be fully realised in God's kingdom, following Jesus now means working for peaceful between people and peace is always built on just and fair relationships.

So, if violence cannot be done in Jesus' name, why does he say he brings a sword? Jesus tells his disciples that when he sends them, they represent him. When people accept or reject them, they accept and reject Jesus whom God has sent. What Jesus teaches is not secret or esoteric, it is to be shouted from rooftops so that everyone can hear. But since decision is required, and some will respond and some will not, Jesus' words will bring division; division even in the heart of that most sacred, most intimate, most important of bonds, the family.

Matthew's community, living post resurrection, post the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70AD, knew the truth of these words. By then the followers of Jesus had been expelled from the synagogue. That exclusion meant that now families were divided; communities were divided. No longer praying together, the followers of Jesus began to interact less and less in the streets and in the market place with their fellow Jews. No wonder it felt like a sword had been wielded in their houses and streets. I assume each group recalled the words of the prophet Micah that we poor humans, by spontaneous tendency, do not necessarily get along even with those of our own families.

Don't be afraid, Jesus had already told them, though it feels like your old familiar life is lost, you will have found your new life and God, who can count the hairs on your head, and who sees even a tiny sparrow fall to earth, will care for you.

So, in a strange way division is comforting. The divisions in families and the violence we see in our world is often the outworking of people's intolerance of the illusions of harmony that we impose on one another. Jesus unmask the discords we cover up. Our responses to Jesus expose our basic orientation to God, and can set direction for a lifetime.

It is not all that difficult to build false peace. It only requires the sacrifice of an innocent victim. It is one of the oldest games we humans play. Someone quite validly unsettles our comfortable social order. Women claim their fully humanity, expect to be equally valued and demand those things that until then have only belonged to men – the right to vote, the right to earn an income and keep it- and so on. Or a colonised people will no longer accommodate themselves to inferior status. Or people marginalised because of disability, same sex attraction, confusion about their gender, or who struggle with addiction – these people we prefer to keep out of sight - will no longer play the game of being discounted so the rest are undisturbed. In extreme forms of scapegoating, the disturbing one is excluded further or even silenced, one way or another, and for a while 'peace', a false peace is restored. Even Church leaders can play this game and it took the late Bishop John McIntyre's refusal to continue to exclude them to unmask the hypocrisy going on in our Church over gay clergy. That division has yet the potential to bring us new life as a national Church but only if we can be honest about who has been paying the cost of unity. Two decades ago, that cost was born by women in the protracted debates about our call to ministry,

So, in the redemptive providence of God, some conflict is the seed bed of new life. As the followers of Jesus our work is discern which. God blesses both children of Abraham, God blesses the son of Sarah born of the promise made by visiting strangers and the son of Hagar, the outsider slave woman from Egypt who is cast off when Sarah's child is safely past infancy. Sarah expelled the child whom she thought threatened hers *but God blesses both* boys and where God brings blessing should we drive a wedge?

'Bring our fear and conflict into the light of your presence' we prayed earlier. There is no other way to find the kind of life worth the having.

Colleen O'Reilly