

## **Pentecost 13C**

**Sermon preached by The Revd John W Stewart**

**at St George's Malvern**

**on 18 August 2013**

Story about family brawl at death bed in a city Hospital.

I was left with the question "What on earth do I do now?"

Or even more importantly, "Dear God, what are you going to do with these people now?"

Sharing this story of ministry being rejected is prompted by today's gospel reading. (Luke 12.49-59) It's supposed to be the good news for us, but it's not easy to see good news in this story, don't you think? All the talk about people being against each other, in conflict.

We need to have some context for this passage. In the chapter before, Jesus has sent disciples out on mission, to share with people they meet the things of God. At the start of chapter 12 they come back with reports of how they've been received. Jesus repeated response is "Look at the whole picture. Not just one experience of opposition." In the middle of the chapter is the scene where two men are arguing about property and money. I looked at that two weeks ago. Jesus response is the story about the man who trusts in

his possessions, only to discover on his death bed they don't help him at all. Jesus says, "Look at the big picture. You are not what you possess. Live now what matters forever."

Then we arrive at this morning's section. The disciples come back to report on their mission. One says, "There's a family that has broken up because of our gospel. The kids are all turned on but the parents are anti." Some one else reports a conversation with a married couple where one is very committed to following Jesus and the other couldn't care less. All kinds of stories are shared. And Jesus reflects that this is to be expected. Some will be able to say yes, others will refuse, and others won't care one way or the other. The decisions people make will set them apart from their loved ones. That's as it is. People are free to choose, and their choices will have consequences. Jesus encourages them to read the signs of the times. Get your antennae out and listen to what is happening in people's hearts. We have to be people who can read the weather, but also culture, trends, human life situations. We need to be able to tell the story in a way which it will be heard and which will draw people to a response. That takes a lot of careful listening and conversation. He ends with the challenge for each of us to be on the journey of spiritual growth and transformation. He says, "Why not judge for yourselves what is right?" You have the gift of knowledge. Use it. You know God and you are growing in God. You are part of the Body of Christ with a task to be getting on with.

Jesus has reflected on his ministry and responses to it. The fire he has brought is the fire of the Holy Spirit, but its work is not always gentle or welcomed. Sometimes people say "When you give yourself to Jesus, you will have sweetness and light for evermore.

No more problems". Not true. When you start hanging out with Jesus and taking his call seriously, you discover you have problems you didn't even know you had. Growing in faith, maturing in service of God, is hard work – it takes some doing. In fact, it's our life's work. Following Jesus is not about playing happy families. It's more about learning, thinking, growing, changing. It's about speaking the truth in love, about being willing to forgive and start again with someone. It's about being open to what God is up to in daily life and experience. The deep peace which Jesus brings might be accompanied by conflict and division because it touches us in our deepest places. It beckons us to leave behind old patterns of thinking, relating and behaving. To be open to the new, the unexpected, the surprising.

The letter to the Hebrews today celebrates the lives of some great people of faith. (Hebrews 11.29-12.2) Each of them struggled, suffered, made mistakes, embraced changes when necessary. These are the great cloud of witnesses who surround us on our journey just as they have done before us. And that text invites us to let go of everything that clings to us and weighs us down and blocks our freedom. So that we can run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Every athlete knows that success takes effort, training, perseverance. So it is in our faith. Jesus is the one who calls us to decide about the things that will be enduring, eternal, worth giving ourselves to. To turn towards Jesus will mean we might be turned away from someone else. That's what Jesus himself experienced and what he says we will experience too.

Let me try and locate this in practical terms for us this morning by reading the signs of the times. At the ABM dinner on Friday evening

we heard about the new partnership being developed between the Anglican Church of Australia and Christians in China. We heard that in the past 30 years 175 million Chinese have converted to Christianity. In the same period Christianity has diminished in Australia. We are down to less than 2% of our population who are at worship Sunday by Sunday. Look around you in church this morning. There are familiar faces; there are folks perhaps you don't know. And there are a lot of empty seats. Now imagine all the seats occupied – especially with young families and children. The question this morning's gospel poses for us is this – what do we have to do to achieve this – to fill all the pews with new people. If we turn our minds to it, what will we see here in 1 years, 5 years, 10 years. The simple fact is that if we do nothing we know what we will see in the future – less people and more empty pews. Jesus says, "When you see a cloud rising you immediately say it is going to rain." You know how to interpret the weather – why do you not know how to interpret the meaning of the empty pews here? What response are we being invited to make?