

Introduction

When I was nursing in London I used to worship at All Souls Church Langham Place which was a very large Evangelical Church just behind Oxford Circus. There were often well over 600 people there at any service. Once a month they held an invitation service where church members could bring their non-Christian friends to hear the Gospel clearly preached, often by John Stott, a well know evangelical preacher and writer on the staff there.

At the end of the service John would issue an invitation to anyone who had responded to the message and wanted to commit their lives to Jesus to come forward to the front of the church to be given some literature, a simple explanation of the Gospel message by one of the team and to be prayed for. John always used to say, "You won't find it easy to come forward because everyone else will be going in the opposite direction so you will need to push through the crowd. But you will be going in the opposite direction for the rest of your life so it is a good thing to learn to do it now."

I always thought that was a really important message and it has sustained me through difficult times of conflict. The fact is that Christians, by their very nature are travelling in the opposite direction to those who live by worldly standards. They have different priorities and concerns and this is seen most clearly in a family. I certainly see it in mine

Jesus' words in our Gospel reading are shocking. Like a crashing dissonant chord at the end of a beautiful piece of music. Surely he is the prince of peace. How can he then say he has come not to bring peace on earth but division; and especially to set family members against each other?

As we have seen before in Luke 's Gospel Jesus is very aware that the Jewish nation is heading towards disaster. It will eventually be destroyed by the occupying Roman powers and the Religious leaders who having opposed his teaching and not recognized God's promised saviour will have no power to

Hebrews 11:29-12:2**Luke 12:49-56**

prevent their ultimate destruction. Jesus' message to his listeners is that the crisis is coming and it will present a challenge to absolute loyalty. The message that Jesus preaches – that God's Kingdom is being established on earth has the power to split families, to divide a nation and to separate friends who have different priorities and make different choices.

We see echoes of this deep division in our country at the moment where views on Brexit divide families, friends, work colleagues, political parties and communities. The wounds caused by the Brexit referendum are a long way from being healed. And those wounds run through many church congregations. But we are not alone. Similar wounds divide many other societies; to give just some examples, the United States has deeply divisive President, India's Hindu leadership seems intent on alienating at least some of its Muslim fellow citizens, and in South Sudan two different forces both led by people claiming to be Christian have been at loggerheads for several years.

In today's Gospel Jesus asks, 'Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?' and speaks of dividing families. This is difficult teaching, but we do ourselves and our communities a disservice if we try to smooth over the issues.

Division is always uncomfortable whether in and between families or in and between countries. Few of us now sing or even know the sort of Victorian hymns that state the need to make choices between good and evil. However, the truth is that sometimes hard choices have to be made and sometimes division becomes inevitable. There are, of course, ways of expressing our differences which are as kind as possible – and ways which are brutal. Sometimes we may be called to speak the truth in love as encouraged by St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. Christians are called to love both God and our

neighbour, and to do that sometimes we need to make a stand, for example, against injustice or discrimination or hypocrisy.

It is intriguing that Jesus' hard words about division are followed by criticism of those who cannot read the signs of the times. How do we read the signs of our times? Jesus seems to be attacking those who only notice the small details and miss the big picture, those who cannot see the wood for the trees. In our cantankerous society, are many of us missing the real big picture? Certainly Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion, among others, are arguing that we are failing to take effective action over climate change. Might climate change be the key sign of the times about which Jesus would warn if he were among us now?

How might Jesus respond to divisions within churches, for example, those between different denominations or those over human sexuality? What would Jesus' message of the kingdom of God have to say to our contemporary situation as in churches and in wider society various groups are attacked and even demonised for who they are, for what they think and for what they believe?

In his first Presidential address to the General Synod, Archbishop Rowan Williams said, 'Mission, it's been said, is finding out what God is doing and joining in'. That was 16 years ago, but is surely relevant in our present dilemmas for all Christian living should be about seeking, as best we can in each generation, to discern what God is doing and join in.

In our second reading the writer to the Hebrews reminds his hearers that all those who have gone before us in faith and commitment, those who risked their lives and wellbeing in order to follow God, they form a cloud of witnesses. Witnesses to their own faith but also witnesses to how we serve the faith in our own generation.

He encourages his listeners to throw off everything that hinders them, like a runner or rider removing everything that adds weight and slows them down. He tells them to turn away from the sin that so easily entangles them in order to press on towards our goal. The image is of a race with our eyes fixed on Jesus encouraging us to follow him.

I remember when I was about five I took part in a running race at our school sport's day. Although I have never been well coordinated, at that age I was quite fast and I found myself leading the race. I suddenly heard voices calling my name, my mother and a friend calling out and encouraging me – so I turned and ran towards them and lost the race. I stopped running in the right direction, I was distracted and turned away.

We too in our lives can be so easily distracted from our commitment to following Jesus. We can be distracted by our love for family and friends, by our ambition, our priorities that can seem more important than serving Jesus. We may even congratulate ourselves that our Christian lives cause no one provocation or offence. But surely that is Jesus' point – if we are truly following him, if we are truly seeking his rule in our lives then we will be travelling in the opposite direction to other people and even those we love will be offended and separated by our faith. How do we measure our lives through God's eyes and perspective?. Are we speaking God's love into our divided and fractious communities – or do we just rub along offending no one?