

Sunday 14th June 2020

Be Peaceful People

Matthew 10: 24-39

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During the past week I have been discussing the Vietnam War with my son. The attitude of people towards this war varied greatly. There were many who were involved in protests against the war. People were either for or against it; in some cases, families were split down the middle. In the United States this division was even more pronounced.

Conflict has a tendency to cause friction in relationships. For example, the American Civil War was a terrible tragedy that divided a nation. Throughout the ages humankind has witnessed much war and conflict seemingly caused by religion.

The reading from Matthew's gospel today is most puzzling for those of us who see Jesus as the Prince of Peace. After all, Jesus was the man who chastised Peter for using violence to defend Jesus at His arrest. How do we relate the idea of a peaceful Jesus with this Jesus who predicts that He comes to bring about conflict; to set people against each other?



I believe Jesus knew what would happen!! He knew that what he taught would be difficult for many. Moreover he knew that the way of love would be impossible for some; the greedy, the power-hungry, the violent, those who want to put themselves and their desires before the needs of others.

Look at the situation in Ireland, which is often seen as a religious conflict war about religious bigotry rather than about loyalist versus republican. This is a 400 year old problem. Loyalists tend to be the descendants of Scottish Protestants brought to Ireland by English landowners after the time of Oliver Cromwell to work on their farms. Republicans are the descendants of the original Irish Catholics who had always lived in Ireland. It just so happens that one side, loyalists, tends to be protestant while the other side, republicans, tends to be catholic.

Yet some of the greatest heroes of the republican movement, seeking to set Ireland free from the English rule, were Protestants. Too easy to say that wars are caused by religion; rather they are caused by human bigotry and hatred, by human greed and lust for power.

Jesus was well aware of this, and he prepares us for the fact that to be truly committed to what we believe will bring about conflict with those who disagree or who have a different perspective. I do not believe Jesus is telling us that we must fight for our faith, or engage in conflict. Rather, he prepares us for the fact that because of human nature it is inevitable that it will happen.

It also has a connection with our situation today – the problem the world is facing with the corona virus. We are not dealing with wars but with a massive upheaval to our way of life – just like the situation in the period in which Matthew is writing his gospel when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, and then turned their attention to taking down Masada, the last community in Judea with almost 1000 rebels including many women and children. After a long siege it became clear that the Romans were about to take over Masada. Rather than become Roman slaves, all but two women and five children took their own lives. This period saw the death of temple Judaism the basis of the Jewish faith for a thousand or so years.

So too, we are facing the upheaval of our society.

We need to be willing to adapt and maintain our sense of peace so as to keep ourselves able to deal with everything the corona virus throws at us.

We are faced with overwhelming fear at times.

But here again, I am certain we can overcome this. Jesus' real message is not about war or national conflict. Nor is it about conflict in a wider sense.

He is reminding us that it is in our personal relationships that conflict can be at its most destructive; the relationships between father and son, mother and daughter, and the wider family relationships. It is also destructive in conflicts in the workplace, in schools, and in all places where human beings come in close contact with one another.

In our lives we must seek to be peaceful people in everything we do. Parents especially must show their children the ways of peace. We must seek to have peaceful households. We must try to solve our problems peacefully and without violence. We must try to be peaceful in our relationships with each other.

Clearly, today, we know that children of parents who are violent to each other will themselves become violent because violence is the way they have learned to solve problems. In school yards, teachers can often identify children in families where violence is the norm, because these children address problems in the schoolyard by violent means.

This morning let us all commit ourselves to being peaceful people, trying always to show the example to others that the way of peace and love is far more preferable to the way of violence and anger.

Tolerance, forgiveness and love are the keys to a peaceful world just as they are the key to peace in all relationships and the key to getting through this terrible virus we are faced with.

Amen

