

An Address by Bill Pattinson for Sunday 21 June 2020

I was quite excited to be preaching today, June 21st. So many connotations; the Summer solstice; the longest day and the start of summer; Father's Day; thoughts of one of my favourite plays "Midsummer Night's Dream"; so much, as they say, to get one's teeth into. Then I read the Gospel for the day. Now that was a different story. Here was a disturbing text that jars our sensibilities, because these startling words of Jesus do not immediately fit in with our understanding of Christ and his Kingdom.

First a very "Happy Father's Day" to all you dads out there. I recall reading a Father's Day card which read, "Being a Father can be expensive, time-consuming, frustrating, confusing and emotionally draining. Actually it's a bit like golf." Now I can really relate to that, both as a father and a golfer....well I like to think I am. And the demands of being a father, and a mother I must add, have recently been particularly challenging. I take my hat off to all dads involved in home tutoring during lockdown, knowing quite well that it was probably mums that were much more active in that role. Well, if the demands of being a father, and a mother, at this time appear daunting, let's take a closer look at the demands Jesus places on his disciples, and therefore in turn on us, as he sends them out on his mission to bring the Kingdom of Heaven nearer.

Two things stand out for me. Firstly when Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." And his second statement, "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." Well, Jesus doesn't pull any punches. He tells his disciples exactly what they are letting themselves into - he gives into them straight. It's all or nothing. You're either in or out. This doesn't sound like the best manifesto for

bringing about a new Kingdom. It's surprising that some of the disciples didn't just walk away, then and there, with a 'Well, thank you very much, master, that's not for me.'

In the first statement the sword is a metaphor for conflict. Jesus' sword is the cross, which creates division. Jesus is sending out his chosen twelve on a mission to make disciples of all nations. Being a disciple of Jesus can be costly. It challenges those people who rule through violence, legitimised by the fear of death. Just as Jesus met a cruel death, so will many of his disciples, not just among the chosen twelve, but throughout history. The radical manifesto of Jesus will be realised through a message of love and healing, not fear and death. What is more this message should be "proclaimed from the housetops." The flat roofs of those days made excellent platforms for preaching. The values of the Kingdom need to be clearly visible, celebrated in the light of the day - in modern parlance they are to be totally transparent. It won't be popular with those who rule in the dark, the bullies and liars, those who consider only their own position and success. But three times in this morning's Gospel Jesus says to his disciples, "Do not be afraid." and the Gospel Reading finishes with those affirming words of Jesus, "those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German academic theologian who was executed at the hands of the Gestapo, declared:

"This affirmation is given by the one who has power over death, the Son of God, who goes to the cross and to resurrection, and takes those who are his with him."

In Jesus' second statement he is not denying the importance of close family, nor the propriety of living in close harmony with them. He is saying however that when there is an important task to be done for the sake of the Kingdom, one's primary allegiance is your relationship with God. What is more, there

may be a need to carry one's own cross, giving up self-interest and competing loyalties in order to be more Christ-like. Jesus wants no lukewarm disciples.

In the Epistle Reading this morning Paul informs the Romans that baptism is the way into discipleship of Christ, where we might walk in the newness of life; a life available to all that can change us; a life which requires us to take up our cross and follow him. The candidate for Baptism is signed with God's sword, the cross, and we may frequently make the sign over ourselves, as a clear reminder that we are his disciples and follow in his way. At the end of the service of Baptism, the candidate is given a candle, representing the light of Christ, reminding us that he is the light of the world, and we are to proclaim the message of his Kingdom, the message of love and healing, openly and honestly.

In the present climate of Black lives matter it seems appropriate to finish with a quote from Martin Luther King from his book, "Where do we go from here?" I wonder what he would make of the present protests as a Christian preacher and disciple of Christ and as a non-violent protagonist of the Civil Rights movement in the 50's and 60's. These words were spoken in 1967. They are as relevant today as they were then.

"And I say to you, I have decided to stick to love. For I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in many circles today. I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love. I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. And I have seen too much hate and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we are moving against wrong when we do it, because John was right "God

is love.” He who hates does not know God, but he who has love has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.”

A year later Martin Luther King was assassinated.

Bill Pattinson 15.06.2020