

Sermon on Sunday 21 June 2020

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Reading: Matthew 10. 29-39

Not peace, but a sword

Hang on, did Jesus actually say what I think he just said?

On first reading, this morning's jaw-dropping words seem at best uncharacteristic.

It starts well, with talk of sparrows and God's care and the numbering of the hairs on our lockdown heads. And then it gets tricky. Jesus goes on to say he'll disown those who disown him; that he 'didn't come to bring peace, but a sword'; to divide families; in fact, 'If you love your family more than me,' he says, 'you're not worthy of me'. Harsh.

But wait, isn't this the same Jesus who championed non-violence and blessed the peacemakers just a few chapters back?

Let's face it, we prefer our Jesus safer; a gentle Jesus, meek and mild. The inconvenient truth, however, is that, like Aslan in the Narnia stories, he's not safe; but he is good. He's challenging and uncompromising and, at times, damned uncomfortable to be around. Jesus was and remains a divisive figure.

So, let's unpack the punch of these hard and sobering words.

When Jesus mentions the sword, clearly he isn't advocating violence. Later, in the garden of Gethsemane, he'd chastise one of the disciples for drawing a sword. The sword he brings isn't a literal one that slays, it's a metaphorical one that divides. Here, he's saying that if his friends choose to follow in his radical footsteps then, as sure as night follows day, they will encounter resistance, not least from those closest to them. In fact, family, Jesus believed, would be among the first to try to dissuade and divert a disciple from her chosen path.

In that culture, family was everything. Your first, your last allegiance was to the family. Jesus wasn't here undermining the family, but he did want to redefine it. For him, in the words of one commentator, 'Family was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry... but whose image you are created in'. For Jesus, family equals humanity in all its rich diversity; each and every one of us collectively the image of our Creator. And he's saying that if we choose to follow him, we will have to redivert our allegiance away from our own tribe, to a family where all are equal and all equally valued. And this redefinition was one of the reasons, of course, why he was so unpopular. When someone challenges tribal ties, prizes power from the hands of the few to place it into the hands of the many, there will always be a backlash.

And haven't we seen that throughout history?

Every human has a tribe; an allegiance; conscious or unconscious. Growing up, as I did, a Northern Irish Protestant, my tribe was hardwired into me from the earliest age. And I've spent much of my adult life trying to re-program that prejudice (let's call it what it is). And after 52 years, scratch the surface, push me into a

corner, and, to my shame, it's still there.

To be human is to be tribal.

Some of you will have seen an image from a Black Lives Matter protest, where violence erupted between a far-right counter-protest (protecting statues, apparently) and some young black teenagers. One of the far-right protestors got separated from his tribe and was surrounded by some very angry young men from the 'enemy' tribe. A group of older men, there to diffuse any potential violence, stepped in and formed a human shield around the far-right protester. And one, Patrick Hutchinson, then carried the man to safety.

It's a powerful image of one man choosing to cross tribal boundaries in the interest of one race; the human race.

I was so struck by this image that I wanted to draw it, as a way of praying, actually, for both these men and for the tribes they represent. I found myself asking, 'What impact will this have on each of them?' Their respective tribes could easily, of course, turn on them. My prayer was that this moment would be a moment that possibly not only saved a life, but made each man see not an enemy but a brother in the face of the other.

I preached a midweek sermon recently about Black Lives Matter, and in some ways this sermon grows out of what I said then. It's on the St Andrew's website if you want to read it. It generated some healthy conversation. In it, I asked us all, myself chiefly, to examine our own privilege and prejudice. I asked us not to allow

anything (however important) to polarize or distract us from facing the truth of racism, and any complicity we might have in it; not to retreat behind arguments about statues or counter-claims like 'All Lives Matter' (that's a given, by the way). I'm not asking us to excuse violence, and certainly not towards the police, whose vital role we celebrate in our prayers today. I am asking us to examine any knee-jerk reaction we might be feeling at this moment or at other times.

Prejudice takes many forms; it's clearly not just a BAME issue, but who among us who are white have ever been treated as a threat first and a human later?; who among us who are white have ever had to tell our children that they need to work twice as hard to succeed or shout twice as loudly to be heard?; who among us who are white have ever been stopped and searched?; who among us who are white have ever had to Google a country before we visit, just to check if it's racist or not?



I'm asking us, actually, to join Jesus on the way of the cross. Taking up our cross is about sacrificing all that prevents us from seeing the face of God in another human being. It's about walking with the abused and the victimised. It's about dying to tribal

allegiances and widening the circle of a new-found family.

I'm asking us to educate ourselves about the historic and contemporary treatment of BAME people in this country; to read

more, to talk more; to listen more, especially to BAME friends, and if we don't have any, to make some.

I'm asking us to walk a mile in the shoes of our brothers and sisters, and then to commit to walking alongside; to call out racism in whatever overt or covert form it takes. To be more than 'not racist', to be actively 'anti-racist'.

If you're listening to this and you're thinking vicars should leave politics to the politicians, I'd say one word – Jesus. He fought injustice wherever he saw it, especially the tribal injustice of the religion of his day. This appeared on my Instagram feed this week, I'm not sure who said it and it challenges me to the core. 'In times of social reform, if your church uses its time, money and influence evangelising *instead* of funding, supporting and amplifying oppressed voices, it's because deep down your church thinks humanity's only hope is in the next life. That makes it a bystander, an accomplice to systematic injustice, and probably doesn't deserve your support'.

The last thing I want is to pile more guilt on myself or anyone else; that just makes me retreat; it never works. If anything, I want to inspire us to see a bigger picture; to imagine and work for a world which more beautifully represents the image of our God, who is Trinity; Son, Spirit, Mother and Father to us all.