

SERMON 25 JUNE 2017

21 years ago, in 1996, I was a delegate at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, as an elder. It was a very difficult time for everyone there as anger, hurt and division boiled over in supposed debate about the ordination and leadership of gays and lesbians. I remember the taut and enraged face of one man as he marched up and down at the side, rallying his troops. This only ended when a very dignified Maori representative called for a year of silence in which everyone could reflect, freed from the open vilification, anger and recriminations. Everyone went back into their “home” groups, randomly selected, in which we had been placed to make sure everyone could feel able to speak. We went in in stunned silence and sat down. After a little while the person who was leading the group opened his bible at Genesis 21, and read the story of Hagar. It brought most of us to tears. I can never hear it since without remembering how it spoke into the deep divisions we felt and brought us to consider how it is that God continues to act across our human weaknesses and pain, our blindness and limited vision; how it is that God still offers blessing. Even today, when this story that is regarded as the starting point of the separation we now experience as Muslim, Jewish and then Christian, we also hear how each is loved and cared for by God, and bears God’s purpose within them.

They are not easy readings from the lectionary today if we just listen casually. In Matthew, it may seem as though Jesus is sitting there giving a hard lecture to his disciples. There is statement after statement about how things should or shouldn’t be; about what may happen or not happen. What we tend to hear most clearly perhaps is Jesus saying that he has come to bring not peace but a sword, to divide families against each other. Let’s look more closely. What was the situation really like? It is not at all probable that Jesus would have given his disciples, ordinary folk that they were, all this teaching in one go. It is recognised that Matthew has put together here a body of teaching into one place, just as he did earlier in what we know as The Sermon on the Mount. In between that and what we heard today there have been many healings, a storm-tossed boat, the dealing with demons, the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the interchange with the woman with a haemorrhage who touched Jesus’ cloak. And Jesus has spoken of new wine needing new wineskins.

What we should, perhaps, have read before today's passage are the opening verses of this chapter where it says that Jesus called his disciples to him to teach them and give them authority to drive out impure spirits and heal every disease and sickness before he sent them out. The 12 are then named, starting with Simon, the leader who would disown him and ending with Judas Iscariot who would betray him. They are ordinary people, like you and me. Jesus has just given them instructions about what they are to do when they go out. There are words of warning about what to expect. Then we have the background of this writing of Matthew's. He and his community knew well what it was like to call themselves Christian. They knew about anger, division, persecution. There is a hard reality. For the first three centuries of Christianity's existence, it was a dangerous thing to bear that name. Those who were baptised knew they were becoming part of the life, death and resurrection narrative of Jesus. It was only after the Emperor Constantine converted that it became more dangerous not to be a Christian than to be one. In other words, there is a context both for the writing and the hearing of these words today.

If, today, we were part of a church in, say, Indonesia or China, or Syria or Iraq, we might hear today's gospel reading differently. They would know about families being divided, about the threat of violence. The other day someone was telling me about a conversation she had had with an Indian man, who, along with his wife, had become Christian. They had been rejected by their Hindu family. I would imagine that people such as these would hear more loudly Jesus telling his followers not to fear those who can kill the body because they cannot kill the soul. Rather we should all be aware of the one that can destroy the soul as well. Then we hear "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care.... The very hairs of your head are all numbered."

Just as with the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes, we may find all these words challenging and inspiring and wonder who we can possibly live up to them. People have made many arguments around all such things – about whether these are meant for the individual, for the community or whatever. I am sure those not very impressive people who were the disciples would have known they had no hope of fulfilling all these exhortations. So, maybe we are meant to stand with them and allow them to focus us back on Jesus, the only one in whom we can see all these things lived out, because these are not just ideas or a philosophy for life but a call to

embody something, a call to act. Stanley Hauerwas writes, “If the truth that is Christ were a truth that could be known ‘in principle’ we would not need to be disciples”. We can’t just accept the theory, the ideas, and find that enough.

We don’t come here on a Sunday just to debate ideas. We come to keep learning about Jesus, to try to grow in understanding of what the call to follow can mean, because the ways in which we hear that may change just as things around us change. The Spirit that was experienced at Pentecost didn’t just blow away again and disappear, to leave everyone to get on with it now that they had experienced its power. It helped those disciples know how to deal with hatred and rejection. Hauerwas says “The Kingdom, it seems, grows through rejection” as the disciples, and then Paul too, had to keep moving on from place to place. It started with the 12, around whom were the crowds of needy people, people whom Jesus saw. Indeed, those crowds are always with us. The disciples were taught by Jesus, enabled to act as they saw how he lived, and then to follow in his way. With so much need around them then, just as there is now, it seems that the church was and is not called primarily to be significant but, more than anything else, to be faithful. Jesus’ words that we heard to day point to the reality and cost of all this. As Pope Francis says “This is God’s way, the way of humility. And there can be no humility without humiliation.”

While we struggle with the statement about swords and division, Hauerwas, again, suggests that the sword that Jesus has brought, the sword that is an alternative to the peace that the world builds, is the cross. He quotes Bonhoeffer, who would be executed for his opposition to Hitler and the Third Reich: “The cross is God’s sword on this earth. It creates division. The son against the father, the daughter against the mother, the household against its head, and all for the sake of God’s kingdom and its peace – that is the work of Christ on earth! No wonder the world accuses him, who brought the love of God to the people, of hatred towards human beings!..... God’s love for the people brings the cross and discipleship, but these, in turn, mean life and resurrection.”

That doesn’t mean that we are defenceless. When we look to Christ we find we are offered truth, and, as many have witnessed, no force is more powerful against opposition than truthful speech. God knows, that takes courage. It’s not just truthful

speech but truthful living. When we see it, we recognise it and are inspired by it. Think of the young man Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, whom we know better as St Francis. Think of Ghandi. Think of Nelson Mandela and Dorothy Day. These were but a very few who found their inspiration in Jesus, even though Ghandi was not Christian. They didn't use the sword of violence but of truth. Then think of countless others we have known about or known for ourselves who have lived this out in their own way

All this is not so much about pacifism and how we resist evil, but about the call to be faithful in our lives to the truth that Jesus lived, even at the cost of what seems divisive. It is about integrity and how we ground that by looking to Jesus.

We have been thinking about the harsh realities of disagreements and the cost of discipleship for many people. I began by talking about the General Assembly in New Zealand. There are many different things, words and actions that divide and cause pain, wounds that often fester for years, hurts that are sometimes handed down from generation to generation. People can become wedded to what they see as the only truth. But what happens is that we can become divided off from our own best selves and we then often thrust that pain deep down to maintain our position. The words we hear today remind us that we do not find the truth or the way to mend our divisions and our hurts by keeping on going in the same way, asserting our truth and believing we have the right. What we hear today turns us back, perhaps, to keep silent before Jesus, the only one whose words bring meaning for life lived in wholeness because he knew the cost. The God who counts the hairs on our heads most surely understands our fears, our pain and our inadequacy. The God who would bless Isaac also heard Ismael crying and blessed him. The God who speaks peace knows the sharp edge of the call to faithfulness. The God who seems to demand such a lot also counts and cares for each sparrow. The God who would love us through it all turns us back to face Jesus and know what is true.

We are called to follow. We may not know what to do or how we are going to do it. We are only asked to be faithful to the task and to know, in the end, that this is about love, and wholeness and healing, about grace and peace for all people.