

**Sermon at Holy Trinity at the Eucharist
at 10am on Sunday 26 May 2019**

Acts 16 v.9-15

Revelation chapter 21 v10, & v.22 to chapter 22 v.5

John 14 v.23 – 29

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

We all know family life can be very unfair, difficult and unkind. I remember when I was seven years old I received as a Christmas present a model fire engine. It was red, and it had a ladder, with an extension. It was the perfect fire engine. I treasured it.

That Christmas my twin brother was given a model crane, also red. It had everything a crane should have, but my twin brother did not like it. It was not the perfect crane for him.

On Boxing Day we had a quarrel. No doubt an excess of trifle and Tizer played a part in this rift. But I can still see before my eye the horror of the scene. My brother jumping up and down on my beautiful fire engine, twisting its wonderful ladders into manic distortions.

As this is a very partial history of my childhood, I shall not confess to my act of retaliation.

In family life we know each other very well indeed. And from an early age we become aware how to hurt the ones closest to us. At any age family rows are deeply disturbing, because relationships of love are involved.

When I was thinking about this morning's passage from John's Gospel, I thought, 'this is about a family tearing itself apart!'

How could Jesus say about his fellow devout Jews, 'Whoever does not love me does not keep my words'?

This is hitting where you know it will hurt. This is red fire engine wrecking at a very adult level. How could John believe Jesus said it?

Jesus was a Jew, living in a Jewish society, members of the same family. But the situation is dangerous, and the language is confrontational.

Jesus, the Son of God, is welcoming us to have faith in him. He is inviting us to receive him as God into our very being. Moreover, he is demanding absolutely that we respond to his invitation. No equivocation. Yes or No. Abide with me in love, or refuse my invitation and face judgement.

There is no coming together. The Gospel of John is imbued with this 'either or' way of thinking. Light or Darkness. Good or evil. Those who are of this world; those who are not of this world.

In John's Gospel, Jesus has been pushed into an explanation, almost a defence in a court of law, of who he is. What it means to be the Son of God.

It is a challenge that in John's Gospel the Jews are seen as persistently refusing. A refusal that will lead to judgement.

In retaliation, whilst the first Christian communities of faith were Jewish, and devoutly so, before long they were excluded from the synagogues.

And so the family row between Christian and Jew began. For centuries, and in our own life time, it has led to unremitting hostility between Christian and Jew. To add to this darkness we have endured periods of unremitting hostility between Muslim and Christian and Muslim and Jew. The civilisation of the family of the three Abrahamic faiths tearing itself apart.

And in the United Kingdom, in mainland Europe, in the United States of America, we are all of us now living in the midst of a massive family row. It may not have anti-Semitism at its heart, though there is anti-Semitism for sure. It may not have anti-Islam at its heart, though there is anti-Islam for sure. It certainly has a competition for resources at its heart, and for sure it has the fair sharing of those resources at its heart. Above all there is a struggle, a striving, to find a sense of self identity at the heart of our family rows. And this is leading to conflict and uncertainty and aggression.

But now, do we have to live out these family rows? In the joy of Christian faith, can we not believe that God's grace is there for all humanity? It is not for us to slam doors on those who in faith seek God in the same ways as their ancestors. The Jesus who, in response to the lawyer's question in Luke's Gospel, 'who is my neighbour?' told the story of the Good Samaritan, certainly did not slam that door.

In living a life in imitation of Christ, do we exclude others? Those who are different, in lifestyle, in opinion, in wealth, in age, in gender, in health, in faith?

In imitation of Christ, do we exclude those others?

Or in our differences, do we rather become engaged in the diversity?

You can tell by the way I have phrased those questions the answers I would like us to give. However, I am not pretending that is always easy. If we look at ourselves, you and me, in the world at large, are we at ease? I know sometimes it is very difficult not to feel anxious, frightened even by our world. Certainly we feel challenged. There is so much to do. So much suffering, so much poverty, so much social injustice to be overcome, here and overseas. And as we are so painfully aware, there is also so much violence and evil intent circling around us. And if we don't encounter our world; if we retreat into ourselves, what do we find there, by ourselves? If we love only ourselves, how much meaning can we find in our lives? How sure are we that what we are doing, by ourselves, is right and good? All this can disturb us deeply.

For all those who believe in faith, we have been given a gift from Jesus. 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.' He gave his peace to his disciples, and it has outlived his life on earth, and his peace has become an enduring and life sustaining bequest to us all. The peace Jesus offers us is not simply the gracious peace of greeting and farewell. The Shalom of courtesy in the Middle East. Nor is it the peace that comes from material and physical comfort and prosperity. The peace that the world gives, but which is so easily and quickly overturned, like a table in a pub brawl.

Nor is it simply the absence of conflict and violence, indeed it is a peace that can still exist within a situation of conflict and violence. I say this even though it would appear contradictory, for the peace of Christ is peace with God. His peace is a positive quality of wholeness in which anxiety is replaced by trust in God's unfailing love and care.

The peace of Christ is a gift of infinite worth that will sustain us in the joys and troubles of our lives. It gives us a sense of wholeness. It is an experience which gives us the meaning of our lives.

I have often wondered how it must be to live in the peace of Christ when your life is very much surrounded by violence and enmeshed in fear. Then I read some of the letters and papers from prison written by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who resisted the Nazi government in Germany during the thirties and throughout the Second World War. He was implicated in the plot to kill Hitler, and was arrested and imprisoned.

One of his letters from prison ends with these words: “ ‘Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land’ proclaims Jeremiah, in paradoxical contrast to his prophecies of woe, just before the destruction of the holy city. It is a sign from God and a pledge of a fresh start and a great future, just when all seems black. Thinking and acting for the sake of the coming generation, but being ready to go any day without fear or anxiety – that, in practice, is the spirit in which we are forced to live. It is not easy to be brave and keep that spirit alive, but it is imperative.”

Amen.