

## Homily For The Second Sunday After Trinity

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

A senior Cleric I once knew had a practice, in the Church's Penitential Seasons, of preaching on Jesus' "hard sayings" - those that shock us. I've no idea what was on his list, and we are in the green of Trinity, not the purple of Advent or Lent, but I suspect he would have put today's Gospel at the top.

"I have not come to bring peace but a sword" (and use it to sow intra-familial disharmony.) Luke's version is even stronger: "whoever...does not *hate* father and mother...etc. cannot be my disciple." Yet five chapters earlier Jesus had declared "Blessed are the peacemakers." In the beautiful readings from the first letter of John, which feature in the Evening Prayer texts between Ascension and Whit Sunday we are told that to hate your sibling is to be "a murderer." No, today's Gospel hardly chimes with the God whom the BCP second collect at Mattins declares to be "the author of peace and lover of concord."

But wrestle with it we must, and in doing so it is not a "cop out" to remind ourselves of what we were told on Trinity Sunday: that God's mind is infinitely greater than the capacity of the greatest human minds. By extension, what is true of the Triune God is surely true of the constituent parts. It should be unsurprising that, like the disciples, we will at times find the one who is both fully human and fully divine difficult to fathom. Rather than understand, we can then only "stand under" the Word "waiting on God" as the psalmist puts it, in patience and humility, allowing Him to open Himself up to us on His terms.

It also helps to remember that exaggeration to drive a point home was intrinsic to the Greco-Roman culture which featured in this cosmopolitan part of the world in which well educated Jews like Jesus and Paul were immersed. ( Having the ability to move literal mountains as a test of faith, to take one example, is to be read metaphorically). We sometimes forget that Jesus often used humour to shine a light.

Despite these qualifications, we cannot evade the hammer blow of our Lord's thrust here, It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran Pastor and martyr hanged by the Nazis in 1944 who once said that Christ's call was "an invitation to come and die." And it was Bonhoeffer who wrote the famous book "The Cost of Discipleship," which would be a fitting title to today's Gospel, as well as the readings from Romans and Jeremiah.

Jesus' uncompromising message is this: that, than which there can be no greater person or thing (i.e. God) deserves a commitment outstripping every other - even if the price is family feuding. I was once privileged to know a Priest who became a monk, now sadly deceased, whose decision to seek Ordination alienated his father for life- part of a long sad tradition with notable examples including our Lord with his wider family, and , most dramatically, St. Francis of Assisi. Barnabas Aid – an agency which supports Christians worldwide persecuted for their Faith recently reported this of North Korea, one of the most dangerous countries on earth in which to

be a Christian :

Many parents dare not even let their own children know they follow Christ, as pupils are encouraged at school to report their parents if they see them praying or reading the scriptures.”

This is the cost of discipleship for millions in our world. (As an aside, perhaps the challenge for the church in the liberal west is not persecution, but blandness, like the church in Laodicea – a lukewarmness, which Jesus is here challenging.)

Why did Jesus, the Lord of Love, invite such hostility? Why does true love lead to the cross, a dynamic into which we enter through our baptism?

Hearing the word “sword” takes us back to Simeon in Luke's account of the Presentation in the Temple when he tells Mary that a sword will pierce her own heart and that for those He encounters there can be no neutrality: it will be for their falling or rising. And Simeon's prophecy that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed connects with today's “nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered.” Is this the nub of the problem? For the prelude to healing by the physician of souls is exposure of the sickness (the diagnosis) in its unflattering, condemnatory detail. Imagine how we would feel if all our thoughts were displayed on a moving message board in Trafalgar square, with our name and address attached. The temptation is to shoot the messenger, or ignore Him. Either way, it's a failure to count the cost of being a disciple.

Jesus' words “those who lose their life for my sake will find it” once came to me in the unlikely setting of a BBC Proms concert on TV featuring all 6 of Bach's suites for unaccompanied 'cello played by Yo Yo Ma. It made me think of the thousands of hours, and how many years of his life he had given up in the service of those masterpieces to reach that level of interpretative perfection. Ma had, in a sense, to die to his own self regard, to “lose his life” for the sake of the music he worshipped, which was his God – given vocation. And in doing justice to every single note of Bach's creation, he found his true self, if the sense of inner peace he conveyed in his playing was anything to go by. So it is with anything worthwhile – a surgeon focusing on a complex operation, a pilot landing a plane in a storm, a Priest giving undivided attention to the penitent in the confessional , or all of us as we obey the universal calling to love, something we can only do via self - displacement.

A few years ago on a Retreat I came upon theses words in a book by an anonymous Cistercian monk, which I wrote down. They chime perfectly with the spirit of our Lord's teaching here:

“Stop bothering about yourself. When you no longer listen to nature's complaints, when you refuse to give a hearing to all anxiety, to all desire but that of love, when you become indifferent to your earthly lot, when you hardly think about yourself either for good or ill and no longer care about the approval of others. When, in a word, you have habitually lost sight of self, you will have penetrated the silent Holy of Holies, the inviolable sanctuary of your soul where God resides and whither he invites you.”

Amen.