It was tempting to pass on the Gospel reading this week in search of an easier text. When looking for the good news, to be inspired and excited by God’s message, this text is a different Jesus to the one we’re used to, the one we want to follow, the one we are happy to invite into our lives.

We’d rather hear the one about the prodigal son, Jesus the healer, Jesus as a baby, Joy to the world, and in fact, the at the beginning of Luke’s gospel, chapter one, we have Zechariah’s prophecy, in which he states that he will guide our feet in the way of peace. Are you having an off day Jesus, are you ok hun?

But this is the benefit of sticking with the lectionary, it forces us to read and wrestle with bits of the bible we’d much rather avoid.

Our difficulty with the text is it suggests we need to take Jesus’ words to heart even though they seem very alien to his teaching about peace. It is a challenge but we’re all in this place of discomfort together.

This text confronts some of our deeply held views about God and our desire for peace. We see plenty of damage caused by the lack of peace.

On a global level, the horrors of war and violence, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, these people are just like us, and then it highlights to us our ignorance of conflicts and violence elsewhere in the world, with people we don’t naturally associate with.

We look across the pond and see the political tension in the US, the partisanship, fierce weaponizing of important issues,

then it’s not such a great leap to look at our own political landscape and wonder what is the future going to look like for us? And then at a domestic level, we’ve either got divisions in our own families or we aren’t far from someone we know who is.

Siblings who haven’t spoken for years. Bitter divorces. Capable adults still living with emotional damage caused from hurt inflicted on them when they were little. We don’t want any more division.

Who we are will be shaped by various relationships, biological, political, social. Our family, friends, our education, our social class, finances, our sexuality and gender, even the things we possess. Our expression of spirituality, ethics and attitudes. It is a vast array of complex influences that shape us.

Looking at Jesus, his identity was determined by his relationship with the Father.

He freely chose that one relationship above all others. That does not mean he rejects all others. Rather all his other relationships are mediated through his relationship with the Father. Jesus’ choice brought about division with the religious leaders, the world, and all who would chose differently.

Ultimately, of the many relationships that shape us, only one can finally be the most significant and decisive for us.

It’s often one relationship makes us uniquely who we are and not someone else. For example, we may all have seen or been the person who has the relationship with parents as the definitive one, with all the other relationships seen and lived out through it.

Their hopes, dreams, and decisions stem from their parents. This one relationship will be decisive and becomes the criterion for determining and incorporating all others.

Ultimately, only one of our many relationships should be the most significant and decisive for us, the relationship with the Father determines identity and the one to whom should shape our existence and life.

That is the choice Jesus sets before us today. Who or what is the determining relationship that gives you your identity and being?

It means choosing the Father as the one primary relationship that determines who we are and what we do. If we choose the Father as that one relationship then it means our parents, children, spouses, or friends do not determine who we are. It means that our jobs, our country, our politics, our possessions do not create our identity. God does.

Those relationships do not have to end. Rather, they exist within the context our relationship with the Father. There will be new dynamics, new priorities, and probably new divisions.

Jesus said it would.

Yet Jesus offers division. He is growing up into the fullness of life and holiness, he expects that of us too. Growing in holiness is difficult and often painful work, the method is division as the way of life, liberation and growth.

We can see the evidence or fruit of that division in the lives of some of the greats.

Those who had the Father first, shaping their choices.

William Willberforce and Thomas Clarkson pursuing the abolition of slavery,

Martin Luther King pursuing the civil rights movement,

Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, an Anglican priest pursuing the acceptance and inclusion of LGBT people in Uganda.

Shannon Dingle, disabled, sex-trafficking survivor, an activist pursuing awareness of disability injustice amongst others. The list can go on.

These, our sisters and brothers, may feel out of our realm of influence, too brave for us, but they are just like us.

Our relationship with the Father should determine what he has placed in our hands, what is our responsibility, whatever he has given us is just as precious to him as civil rights movement or anti-slavery.

It determines how we vote, how we use our time, how we speak up about our faith when aggressively attacked.

Lord knows, we face division but it offers spiritual growth, it might feel very much like it costs us when in fact it loses nothing and gains everything.

It gives us our truest and most authentic identity. It is the division that transforms lives, makes sacred all our other relationships, and the world. It is the grit that makes the pearl.

As Clare of Assisi, whose commemoration was this last week put it as ‘We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become.’