

Sermon for Sunday 25th June 2017

+ I can't be the only one who longs for some light relief. At the beginning of last week I must admit I began to hesitate before switching on the news – I needed to be ready and prepared before hearing about any more terror attacks, seeing the charred high rise reminder of yet more tragic loss of life or listening to endless political recriminations. For some time now it feels as though we've been inhabiting a fast-changing landscape. A landscape in which assumptions we've taken for granted for what seems like a lifetime have been shifting rather too quickly and deep divisions in society have surfaced: Terror not in war but on the streets of London and in a concert venue in Manchester, the targets innocent people – tourists, children. Politicians capitalising on a tragedy, with angry people being filmed pointing fingers of criticism at the emergency services, at council officials, at one another because they feel ignored, disadvantaged and unheard. And all the while a backdrop of political uncertainty, as our politicians flounder. These are undoubtedly worrying times and I can't be the only one who yearns for a return of normality, stability and yes, even courtesy if you've seen the way last week's BBC *Question Time* was interrupted by a shouting heckler. Yet, as the old adage from the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is nothing new under the sun.

We understand the wisdom of this when, as people of faith we turn to the Bible for a crumb of comfort, and come up against the Gospel set for today. Not much comfort there. Instead of a message of peace, love and joy, Jesus strides on stage with a warning: *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in law against her mother in law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

There really is nothing new under the sun because the people for whom this Gospel was intended were living in times not dissimilar to our own. Their values were being questioned too, normality was a thing of the distant past – they were living in difficult political times and there was widespread unrest. They too were facing deep divisions in society and, as today's Gospel warns – even divisions between family members.

So when Jesus' words present us with a difficult Gospel message and all around us is shifting and uncertain, how do we view God our Heavenly Father, the one who we know never changes? God who was there at the beginning, who created us, and who will be there at the end of time?

This was a question I was asked several years ago in an important interview during the process of being selected to train for ordination. The interviewer asked me something along the lines of 'how do I view God when under pressure?' It was May, I was under pressure and the thought that sprang immediately to mind was that of a Maypole, solid as a tree trunk, tall and un-missable, decorated with garlands of flowers and with people holding ribbons and dancing all around it. The Maypole I tried to explain, represented God, with us his people moving this way and that, sometimes in step, keeping up and other times losing the plot and tripping over each other. When the interviewer's report arrived later, I realised my mistake – I had no idea that Maypoles are a pagan symbol, and my interviewer had not been impressed.

Which is a pity really, because I still think it's an analogy that pagan or not works rather well. Like the Maypole, God is at the centre of everything, unshakeable, unmistakable, unchangeable. We human beings on the other hand are often fickle. We're easily swayed by others' opinions, we're blown this way and that. We cling on to security and normality, and we let go of what really matters. Our sinful actions trip us up, dividing us one from the other, but in our better moments we work together, steadying each other.

Perhaps a better example of the unchangeable nature of God would have been to respond to my interviewer's question with a prayer of St Teresa of Avila:

*Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away;
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things
Whoever has God lacks nothing;
God alone suffices.*

Returning to today's difficult Gospel passage, it's important to understand that this Gospel was addressing the uncertain times faced by the embryonic church in the ancient world. In the years following Jesus' death and Resurrection, it became increasingly impossible to adhere to both Judaism and Christianity. Families were divided one member from another as Jesus' followers were put under pressure to make the difficult choice of whether or not to leave all that was familiar - their synagogues, their culture, their community and even their families, in order to follow him.

Today Christian families not so very far from here are being divided in a similar way. As we know from massacres earlier this month of Coptic Christians in Egypt, in many parts of the world to be a practising Christian is extremely dangerous. Members of those beleaguered and persecuted churches face pressure from the authorities, their neighbours and even from within the family, to renounce their Christian faith. As a mother what I would advise my sons to do? Risk their lives by staying and continuing to practice their faith, risk their lives by leaving for an uncertain future in the frequently unwelcoming Christian west? I don't know and inevitably not all family members will agree on any one desperate, potentially divisive course of action.

In these circumstances – in the ancient world and in many parts of the world today, Christians have faced and are facing the real possibility of making faith-based decisions that will cause family strife and division. Jesus knew that this would be the case and although his words in today's Gospel are a warning that following him will never be the easy option, he also says, three times in this one Gospel passage, do not be afraid of these uncertain times.

Do not be afraid because as he reminds us God is a faithful creator – if he knows and cares about even little sparrows, who are sold two for a penny, how much more will he care for us, who are made in his image. God knows every hair of our head, we are his children and he loves us. Jesus tells us that however much we are divided in our earthly life one family member from the other, whatever the world situation, the political climate and the atmosphere on the streets, what really matters is God's judgement – at the end of the day it's what we do in God's eyes that counts.

Many years ago, living and working with Italians, I learnt to relish their tremendous verve, their love of food and the good things in life. The endless conversations. And as debate went deeper it was fascinating to discover that their values were not always my values; many of my friends and colleagues took a distinctly un-British delight in flouting the law and outwitting the taxman. But what I was always struck by was their absolute certainty when it came to God. Here there was no disagreement, difference of opinion or division, because all of them knew that throughout their lives, in the order of allegiance, God comes first, then family, then country.

The words of today's communion motet seem to sum it all up rather well:

Irrational and empty fears overtake our minds. Often they fill our hearts with madness, devoid of hope. Mortal, what profit is there in striving for earthly things, if you neglect the heavenly? In all things there is happiness for you, if God is on your side. Amen.