

Sermon June 6, 2021

I want to begin by saying I feel fortunate to be giving this sermon today, June 6, which was my father's birthday. He would be 119 years old today. Something for the Guinness book perhaps.

We all have our favourite Bible verses. For me the one that gets to the heart of the Christian message is in John chapter 10: "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." In today's gospel from Mark, that message is not as apparent as is in John, but it is still there. If we are truly the body of Christ, then we are charged with living our own lives and helping others to live their lives more abundantly.

Today we see Jesus arguing with a group of religious leaders. Nothing unusual about that. These are men who feel, threatened by this Galilean preacher and the apparent power of his message. He heals people miraculously and all the while he is gathering huge throngs of followers. The healings alone are witness to Jesus' desire for his people to have life. Why should these good works be a problem for the Pharisees and their like?

Put simply they feel threatened by his power. So threatened in fact that they accuse him of using the power of evil to work his miraculous healings. Jesus rebukes these self described wise leaders of the community with words of reason. *How could this be? How could anyone use the power of evil to defeat evil?* "How can Satan drive

out Satan?” Jesus is clearly right from a rational perspective. If the Pharisees do in fact feel threatened why would such educated men advance such an illogical argument. It would seem to be the same kind of twisted reasoning people of all ages use when they feel themselves or their values and customs to being called into question perhaps even in danger of disappearing. They (or we) reason:

Those people must be our enemies because they do not follow our customs. If different from us they must be from the other side, the wrong side, the dark side. The dark side argument would be the “trump” card of ancient times.

According to the religious authorities of the 1st century Jesus, this small town preacher is in league with Satan himself! But he is also an outsider from Nazareth of all places! And outsiders as we all know are dangerous! What the leaders failed to see was that they were condemning and trying to destroy a movement of *people*, Jewish people just like themselves. Created in the image of God.

And so in this 21st century we often condemn those who appear to want to shake things up. The outsiders may look different from those in the majority. They may speak differently, have different values. They may be people of Islamic faith who are bent on instituting Sharia law despite any evidence for such a claim. They are labelled as the dangerous dividers of the community.

We have heard over the past few years the cry of “America First.” This is not new. It has appeared in history at various times. In the 1920’s for example white

supremacy gained great traction in the United States. The notorious KKK claiming to be the defenders of Christian America reached its peak of some 5 million members in 1925. Indeed white hooded brigades of the Klan marched openly, under legal permit in the streets of Washington D.C. That was 3 yrs. before my father tried unsuccessfully to gain entry to the United States.

What results when established groups in a given society oppose those who are in some way different in language or custom?

We have the words of Jesus which state clearly that such opposition between groups, opposition based on false or irrational claims can lead only to division in that community. “A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.”

If the world wide Christian community is that very kingdom it would appear that we are in big trouble. For a kingdom or community divided against itself will eventually fall, and disintegrate. The falling apart would be the proverbial “glass half empty” view. Or would it. *Change* can often be confused with decline, decay, or just coming apart. All of these are in one way or another uncomfortable and we may invent reasons for maintaining the status quo. (Let’s leave all the uncomfortable and largely unoccupied pews right where they are. They were put there for a reason in 1898. By order of Queen Victoria, so I’m told. Don’t even think about “secular music” as part of worship even though we preach that all things come from thee o Lord. So much of it really is evil, like Black Sabbath)

But Jesus is telling us that unless we are willing to risk undergoing what may seem radical change (Nicodemus must be born again), then surely we are wasting our God-given lives by continuing with the same old same old. To show the extent to which we must go to live our lives to the full (I have come that you may live and have it more abundantly) Jesus points to all who surround him. “These are my brothers and sisters.” He loves them as if they were his own blood relatives. And to emphasize the gross error of finger-pointing he says in John’s gospel: “Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone” The fact that Jesus’ own mother and brothers think that he has “completely lost it” is for another day.

For this day let us remember that change in attitudes towards one another is necessary to heal our divided kingdom.

HISTORICAL NOTES

Throughout history societies have risen and fallen. The ancient Middle East saw a succession of kingdoms and empires come and go. Jesus’ own Jewish community, under the hereditary leadership of the temple priests was driven out of Judea by the Romans just decades after the Crucifixion. The great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. As a result the form that Judaism took was greatly changed from what it had been since the time of Solomon.

Western European society which up to the 1500's was largely centred around the Roman Catholic Church, broke up into warring factions. The resulting Protestant reformation was the greatest change in structure and belief that Christianity had seen in over a thousand years. All of this during the Renaissance period, literally a time of "rebirth."

In 1961 at the trial of high ranking SS commander, Adolf Eichmann, one of the witnesses against Eichmann was a holocaust survivor a man named Yehiel De-Nur. De-Nur fainted after giving his testimony. Was this a result of hatred or fear of horrid memories? "No" he answered. "I realized that he was not some god-like army officer who sent so many to their deaths. No, this Eichmann was an ordinary man." What so terrified De-Nur was that he realized he and Eichmann were both human beings. Both capable of showing compassion and committing atrocities.

PERSONAL NOTE

I mentioned earlier that my father emigrated from Italy in the late 1920's. Due to strict U.S. regulations of the day he was denied entry and as a result he ended up coming to Canada where he met my mother. Sometimes good things happen to those who are outsiders.