

Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall

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Decisive and divisive faith How do we decide and act?

'Do you think that I come to bring peace to the earth?

No I tell you but rather division!'

What are we to make of this text?

This is not exactly a good advertisement slogan for Christianity.

How does this fit with Jesus as the one who brings peace, who is the shalom of God.

What about those angel songs of peace on earth?

Isn't Christianity about peace and justice and finding ways to live together, forgiveness and reconciliation?

What does it mean to have all this talk about dividing families?

This is a disruptive set of words. It would probably be included in the top 10 hardest sayings of Jesus. Yet even at his presentation in the temple Simeon could say that he would be a sign that will be opposed.

I wonder about the baptism and the fire on earth.

In the scriptures fire is often used as an image about being refined or purified.

Jesus might be saying that his coming does bring about a point of decision. You need to decide whether you follow Jesus or not.

Jesus himself faced this point of decision. He was feeling the weight of his baptism, his suffering, death and resurrection.

We catch a glimpse of the human Jesus. Jesus voices the distress he is under as he faces it.

At this point in the gospel he has already set his face to Jerusalem.

This is already having consequences. A Samaritan village refuse to welcome him, others reject what he has to say. S his decision is already causing division.

Jesus has come to proclaim the goodness and mercy of a loving God who welcomes and includes all sorts of people, sinners and outsiders, tax collectors and outcasts. There were people who didn't like that. People still don't.

For those who followed Jesus and those who formed the early Christian Church the reality was that it did mean division in their household, their family.

Christians were not classed as an accepted religion by the Romans in the same way as Judaism. It was a risk to identify as one. It placed you on the outside.

Where you found your belonging in Jewish and Roman society was within your household and to follow Christianity meant to outside of your normal family structures unless your whole family converted.

To live out what you believe often has consequences.

Jesus' words are reassuring in a strange sort of way.

Conflicts and differences will happen because people will see things differently.

I heard a South African white person talk about this reality in relation to apartheid. He said that this sort of passage was helpful because it spoke to the painful reality that he and many others were living.

To not accept the unequal relationships between coloured and white was to go against your family and your part of society and this had a great cost.

Faith in God is not always about being nice and being successful. It can often be a struggle with the reality of life and the challenge of living out the gospel.

To live out loving God and neighbour can be challenging and hard.

Part of it is interpreting the present times.

God is at work in the world but how do we discern it?

The church has wrestled with this for generations and has wrestled with how to work out what God is up to.

There have been debates over slavery, about remarriage of divorcees, the status of women, how to deal with sexuality, a voice for the indigenous, how to respond to those who society places on the outside.

This does mean difficult decisions and choices that can cause division. God's agenda of love and peace and justice for all often stands in the way of those who seek power and ambition.

Gerald the South African talked about what they found helpful in discerning how to respond. He talked about the method the catholic worker priests devised as helpful - a three-fold way of living which they summarised as see- judge-act.

First you look at reality. What is God doing? Is God's reign come on earth? If not, we turn to the scripture to judge by God's prophetic word our reality, to perceive where we might act.

If it is not how God might want it to be, then we discern a way to act.

This is a process we can go through again and again as reality changes. It is a way of living the faith to see, to judge and to act.

This is a process of us being open to being refined and changed. We can be transformed and to see how God desires us to act in the world.

The light of God's love is refining and illuminating.

The light of God's love calls us to action.

Praying and meditating on God's love is good, but it is not about staying still but about being stirred by God's love to action.

This is what the letter of the Hebrews says as the writer gives example after example of those who by faith persevered and found ways to endure.

The writer goes on to say since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

This is what Mary Oliver says in her poem 'What I have learnt so far'. There is a call for the gospel to move us to live out what we believe.

*Meditation is old and honourable, so why should I
not sit, every morning of my life, on the hillside,
looking into the shining world? Because, properly
attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion.*

Can one be passionate about the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit to no labor in its cause? I don't think so.

All summations have a beginning, all effect has a story, all kindness begins with the sown seed.

Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of light is the crossroads of —indolence, or action.

Be ignited, or be gone.

Witnesses before us guide us in the way and our gracious God guides us.

Edith Stein grew up in a Jewish family came to faith as a Christian before World war II and joined a convent. She ended up dying in a concentration camp.

This is a part of a poem she wrote.

*Who are you, kindly light, who fill me now,
And brighten all the darkness of my heart?
You guide me forward, like a mother's hand,
And if you let me go,
I could not take a single step alone.*

Lectio:
Isaiah 5.1-7
Psalm 80.1-2, 8-19
Hebrews 11.29-12.2
Luke 12.49-56