

**Third Sunday after Pentecost Year A (Proper 7A)** 21 June 2020

**Lectionary Readings:** Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew 10:24-39

As you well know, in our Anglican tradition we follow the lectionary readings system where scriptures for each Sunday are selected so that over a three-year period, we hear a very large portion of the Bible. I really do appreciate not having to choose the Sunday readings with, perhaps the exception of days like today. As someone in our reflection group on Wednesday commented “well I’m glad I’m not preaching!”

Today in our first reading from the Hebrew Scriptures we hear the story of Hagar and Ishmael, a complicated, heartbreaking, tragic tale if ever there was one. Indeed, we are still living with the consequences of this troubling story today. After all, Jews and Christians trace their lineage to Abraham through Isaac, whereas Muslims trace theirs through Ishmael.

And the Gospel from Matthew is no less awkward.

“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.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Or as the Message Bible translates this passage:

“If your first concern is to look after yourself, you’ll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you’ll find both yourself and me.”

Really, Jesus? What gives? Why all this talk about bringing division and the sword, about setting members of families against one another? That’s your good news for our fractured and divided world? What happened to Jesus the Prince of Peace? Jesus the agent of God’s reconciliation, drawing all people and all things into one?

If that is the message of Christ, why bother? We humans are actually very good at coming up with enough division on our own.... in our families, our communities, our country, and in our world! We only have to look at the events of recent weeks and the rise of the black lives matter movement .

We divide ourselves up... the insiders and the outsiders, the good guys and the bad guys, the Liberals and Labour .....Anglicans, Sydney and otherwise, and everyone else of course. So where is the good news in all this talk of division?

It is important for us to understand that the kind of division Jesus is talking about is different. It is the kind of division that comes out of competing actions and conflicting perspectives and motivations. Remember... the people Jesus was talking to understood family a bit differently than we do.

Individual, unique identity was not a family value. Identity was formed **not** by who you were...but who your family was. The son of a carpenter grew up to become a carpenter. The son of a fisherman

grew up and became a fisherman. And if you were a daughter... your identity was even more confined to not only your family's identity but also to your gender...a second-class citizen. You kept to your expected role and place in the family. No deviation!

That is why, when people heard Jesus teaching and witnessed His miracles, they said, "Wait, isn't that Joseph's boy from Nazareth??" "You know, just a carpenter." Carpenter's sons were not saviours...they were carpenters!

But Jesus reminded the people, and reminds us, that our identity does not begin with our human family, but with who we are in God's family. Who God created us to be in God's image.

Our human families can be loving and nurturing... or not so loving and caring. They are sometimes even abusive and neglectful, sometimes supportive of who we really are....and sometimes not so supportive.

But in the household of God, we are loved individually, uniquely, unconditionally. Or as someone said, "God loves you just the way you are. But God loves you too much to leave you that way."

God does love us...and God does push, and prod and challenge us each day...if we are listening... to follow Jesus. And sometimes in our seeking to follow Jesus, we do find ourselves at odds with family.

To follow the call of God, to live as Jesus teaches and pushes and prods us...has real potential to cause division. There is no getting around it. Jesus calls us to commitment, not just involvement.

It's like the old story of the ham and egg breakfast: In that breakfast, the chicken was involved, but the pig was definitely committed!

Will following the call of God cause division when we stand with those our dominant society may deem unworthy... the marginalized, the poor and the oppressed? Will it cause division to stand against injustice, racism, sexism and other isms that divide us? Absolutely!

We might hear this gospel reading today, and hear Jesus saying that we must absolutely disregard our nearest and dearest, but I believe that is not His meaning here.

Instead, I hear a call to a love and commitment to follow Jesus which cannot be compromised by other competing loves.

When I visit London, one of the things I love to do is to go to Evensong at Westminster Abbey. A monument to the faith of the people for more than 800 years, it is virtually impossible to find a building more steeped in British history.

Hundreds of people daily, walk through the great stone structure, and marvel at the beautiful stained glass and graceful sculptures of saints and sinners, warriors and monarchs. They stand at the several altars and hear the stories of men and women who were committed to their Christian calling and endured hardship for the sake of the gospel.

Above the Abbey's Great West Door stand ten statues to modern martyrs - Christians who gave up their lives for their beliefs. The martyrs are drawn from every continent and many Christian

denominations and represent all who have been oppressed or persecuted for their faith.

Among them are victims of Nazism, communism and religious prejudice in the 20th century. They include civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr and Oscar Romero, Archbishop in El Salvador, both of whom were assassinated; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed by the Nazis in 1945; and Wang Zhiming, a pastor killed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

As I watched the people file through and around this place of worship, I wondered how many truly saw the Abbey as what its mission statement declared, 'a school of the Lord's service.'

I wondered if the people visiting there really saw the building as a testament to so many who found themselves in conflict with family because they discovered and lived out their identity as a Child of God, and a follower of Jesus. A testament to those who have gone to places of deep poverty and danger, injustice and war to be Jesus for others.

So what of this life, for us as Christians that Jesus talks about in today's gospel. What of this life as a Child of God, loved and forgiven, a follower of Jesus. A life in which we are called to take up His cross...even when to do so may bring division and conflict, not peace.

How can we live this extraordinary, life-giving faith in a consumer culture of individualism that finds less and less value in the kind of commitment to which Jesus calls us?

The good news is that as followers of Jesus, our identity is not defined by the world, or by our family expectations, but by the God who loves us more than we can imagine. And as God's beloved the Gospels call us to a radical reversal of values which will make us uncomfortable, and calls us to new places of commitment. The reality is that the love of God will cause division because some things are worth fighting for.

Martin Luther King Jr. was divisive, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa were divisive. Cesar Chavez was divisive. Archbishop Romero in El Salvador was divisive.

And Jesus said: If your first concern is to look after yourself, you'll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you'll find both yourself and me.