

SERMON: Sunday –14 August 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Interpreting the Present Time

Isaiah 5:1-7

Luke 12:49-56

What could Jesus have possibly meant when he said,
Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

If one was running the race to be the next Prime Minister, that sort of statement wouldn't get them very far, would it?

But the politics of Jesus is different. Thank God.

There is a sense that when there is a disagreement there is often an uneasy peace. Surely it's better to have instead, a lasting peace which surpasses one's understanding.

Sometimes the kind of peace we endure is one which is more a grumbling toleration rather than anything better. And often that can be that one side simply ignores the other and refuses to engage.

Surely, dialogue is better than a cold silence.

Households will be divided, said Jesus.

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law

We saw earlier that we are all different, even within the same family. Our children do things differently from the way we did. Our grandchildren might go even further with their differences. Or they might even be more like us than our children are. I don't know. I don't have grandchildren.

We often hear it said when two different positions or parties exist, that there is more which unites us than that which divides. This is often said in church circles when opportunities arise for ecumenical gathering; when we're

confronted with the scar of church denominationalism, something that seems to be difficult in our own nation. We have much to repent of.

The Psalmist is right,

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:19

What then are we to make of “in Christ there is no East or West”?

That implies either that there are no differences or at least that differences don't cause disunity. I think the latter is nearer the mark.

Jesus might be teaching about division being a springboard to a deeper, lasting peace, rooted of course in Christ.

No East nor West
No black nor white
Neither Gentile nor Jew
We're One in you, O Christ.

There seems to be a fallen human tendency to divide and to separate into two polarised positions, each at either end of, what should be, a broad spectrum.

Most of the things which cause disagreement are not black and white. They are usually shades of grey. And it's in the shades that peace is often to be found - black listening to white, white listening to black, really listening, and peace in the grey.

Christ is the bridge on which opposing sides travel to meet each other in peace. In Christ, there is reconciliation and we are her ministers.

Christ is the One who said, “I have come to cast fire upon the earth”. Now depending on your view point, you can hear that negatively or positively (or perhaps somewhere in between since we're talking about not polarising or dividing into black and white alone).

For me, I have come to cast fire upon the earth, is a call for total transformation, revolution even, whereby the Holy Spirit is given centre stage to baptise the earth with God's total goodness, righteousness and peace, setting things right, pouring out grace upon grace, ministering kindness and bringing reconciliation.

No wonder the prayer of the church is, come, Holy Spirit.

Come and inspire and lead us always into the Jesus Way, so that where there is division, we might not shy away from it but actively engage in it to help bring peace and harmony.

I came across a Reflective Prayer this week written by the Spill the Beans team. It explores the idea of believers holding different opinions based on their interpretation of the Scriptures and takes the examples of violence, slavery and power.

Violence.

The Bible says
it is okay to use violence,
that nations are built on war,
that God sides with the victorious,
that might makes right.

But the Bible also says
blessed are the peacemakers,
lament the tragedy of warfare,
turn the other cheek,
that God inflicts defeat on the faithless.
So, Lord, which is it?

Slavery.

Slave owners were often Christian,
using the Bible to defend their practice,
building vast wealth
on the backs of others,
dining in polite company
while their hands were dripping
in the blood of the enslaved.

But slave abolitionists were often Christian,
using the Bible to motivate their actions,
seeking the common humanity
in all people, created in God's image,
and motivated by justice for all.
So, Lord, which is it?

Power.

The Church is bedecked in gold and velvet,
rich artwork and ancient treasures,
connected to high places,
indulged by the powerful
for their own ends.

But the Church is counter-cultural,

living with people on the margins,
ignored by the majority,
disdained by many,
yet vital for those in need,
those seeking belonging,
those with love to offer and those open to receive.
So, Lord, which is it?

When faith divides us,
may we always ask:
is what I am doing bringing harm or healing?

There will always be divided opinions. We must accept that and give up all notions of being the sort of rightness and certitude that refuse to listen properly and sensitively to the other side.

The theologian Joan Chittister wrote that,
“The pitfall of the religion of perfection is self-righteousness, that cancer of the soul that requires more of others than it demands of itself and so erodes its own fibre even more. It is an inner blindness that counts the sins of others but has no eye for itself. . . .

(On the other hand) Real contemplatives receive the other with the open arms of God because they have come to know that for all their emptiness God has received them.”

Joan Chittister, *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light*
(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000)

RR wrote recently about letting go of the idea of our innocence. He said this, “We come to God not by doing it right, but by doing it wrong. And yet the great forgiveness is to forgive ourselves for doing it wrong. That’s probably the hardest forgiveness of all: that I’m not perfect, that I’m not unwounded, I’m not innocent. If I want to maintain an image of myself as innocent, superior, righteous, or saved, I can only do that at the cost of truth.”

(SLIDE)

Or as Trask says to Abra in *East of Eden*, with its roots in the Biblical story of Cain and Abel,

“And now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.” —John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*.

We aim to be good, and accept that we’ll never be perfect. What a relief!

The Greek translation of the word for division that Jesus used in Luke 12 is *diemerizo*, a word that is only found once in the Greek New Testament. It means a disunion of opinion and conduct. There's no doubt that in proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus was calling people back and into their true calling as the people of God. That this called for a breaking with past behaviour, a disunion of opinion and conduct, goes without saying.

Behold I am a new creation, the old has gone, the new is here.

It would all be hopeless if all Jesus did was call for such a disunion. But it would only be hopeless if he hadn't suggested an alternative. And that alternative is to embrace the kingdom of God which he said was among you and within you, as a baptism of fire.

And in this, we discover that deep, rich and lasting peace and the ministry of reconciliation, between ourselves and God and between ourselves and one another, and the joy of abundant life.

"Christianity is not called to conservation, but to change. Jesus came into the world, not to conserve the system that was, but to change the world into what it ought to be." ~ Tony Campolo

And so we can rejoice that the time is here for change from glory into glory and therefore let's begin or keep on partnering with God and with one another in doing all we can to make such change happen here in KNEC and beyond.

In Jesus name. Amen