

Peace and Division

Last Sunday's Gospel reading, the first part of which we heard just now (Luke 12.49-53), is one of those very challenging, and we might almost say, unexpected, passages in the Bible. Jesus has come, he says, to bring not peace but division. These are not words we would expect or wish to hear as we come together to pray for peace and reconciliation.

For the overall thrust of the New Testament, of the Gospel, the Good News, is a message of love, peace and reconciliation: love of God and of one another, reconciliation between God and humanity and between all human beings.

So how are we meant to understand our Lord's apparently contradictory words in this passage? For they are not unique to Luke's Gospel, since similar words are recorded by Matthew in his Gospel. Indeed Matthew quotes Jesus as saying that he has not come to bring peace but a sword (Matthew 10.34-36).

I would suggest that Jesus is not saying that it is his aim, his purpose to bring conflict and division, even violence. No, his message is one of love, peace, reconciliation. It is rather that the challenge of his teaching and of his ministry will result in division. The consequence is that the Good News will be accepted by some but rejected by others, and that will almost inevitably lead to conflict.

That was true during his earthly ministry and subsequently too. We see division not only between those who accept Jesus and those who reject him, but also within the Christian Church. We see that in the pages of the New Testament, above in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of St Paul. And that may indeed be the context in which Luke and Matthew recall these words of Jesus.

We see division of course throughout the history of the Church, even in our own day and age. And at times division has indeed lead to violence, even brutality. To some extent that mirrors division in society more generally and in the wider world.

Which is why the need for peace and reconciliation is so pressing both in the world and in the Church today. We must continue to pray for that, and to do our part, even in very small ways, to challenge and break down division and prejudice. May God give us the strength and the resolve to live out in our own lives the Good News of love, peace and reconciliation.

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23rd August 2019