

"Something to Say about Priorities"

Pent. 5: 06/19/2005

Matt. 10/Jer. 20

Today is Father's Day in the States. And it strikes me as a little ironic that in our lessons for today we hear Jesus say, "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 a mother-in-law against her daughter-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..."

Not very comfortable words to be thinking about on Father's Day, Or any day for that matter. Whatever happened to the notion Of "Traditional Family Values"? Isn't Jesus supposed to be "pro-family"?

But it gets worse than that. Jesus even seems to be speaking Against "Peace"—contradicting the message of the Christmas Angels, of "Peace on Earth and Good Will toward all with whom God is well pleased."

Here in Matthew, Jesus seems to be putting those words of Good News on their heads: "Do not think I came to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword..."

Again, not very comfortable words for us to hear when peace in the Middle East is our agenda whether we're working For NGO's or for the US government.

And how can we "pray for the peace of Jerusalem", as the Psalms call us to do, if it puts us at odds with what Jesus is telling us about his mission?

Frankly, it's hard to figure out what exactly Jesus means.

How do we make sense out of it?

Well, one thing is to keep in mind the actual results of what Jesus did: The "facts on the ground" as it were.

Whenever I walk through the Old City from the apartment over in East Jerusalem, I walk through St. Stephen's Gate—the traditional site where St. Stephen was martyred—stoned to death. I pause. It isn't that easy to get through that gate. I was stopped by Israeli security on Tuesday and have had to go through a checkpoint there since then.

St. Stephen was just the beginning of it. The ranks of the martyrs is into the thousands. Countless Christians giving up their lives for the sake of the Gospel. Some doing it fearlessly, as St. John Chrysostom and Polycarp did, and others with fear and trepidation. Chrysostom was the church leader of Constantinople in the 4th century when Rome was persecuting the Church..

The Roman emperor had him arrested and charged with being a Christian. If he did not renounce Christ, then he would have him banished from the kingdom.

Chrysostom responded to the threat by saying that the emperor could not do so, “because the whole world is my Father’s kingdom.”

“Then,” replied the emperor, “I will take away your life.” To which Chrysostom said, “You cannot, for my life is hid with Christ in God.”

Next threatened with the loss of his treasure, the saint replied, “You cannot, for my treasure is in heaven where my heart is.”

The emperor made one last effort: “Then I will drive you away from here and you shall have no friend left.”

But again Chrysostom responded, “You cannot, for I have one Friend from whom you can never separate me. I defy you for you can do me no harm.”

It's quite a fearless image of faith under fire, but I have to admit that as inspiring as it may be, I find myself identifying more with the old Whiskey Priest from Graham Greene's **THE POWER AND THE GLORY**, who approaches his own arrest and ultimately his execution during the radical anti-clerical

phase of the Mexican Revolution with all sorts of fears, doubts and misgivings because of his own shortcomings both as a priest and as a Christian—he had be arrested with his mistress. Our lessons are so tightly woven together and so horrendous that it takes your breath away: In our first lesson Jeremiah cries out his laments from his prison cell, or perhaps just after he had been released. He had been arrested for preaching down at the Dung Gate against the abuses that were going on over in the Hinnom Valley, just west of Zion Gate below the Old City —what later came to be known as the fiery pits of Gehenna, Hell itself.

Parents had been sacrificing their children down there.

Talk about family values!

And Jeremiah denounced it--saying that the place would be remembered forever as an abomination. A place to be hissed at, so that everyone who passes by will be horrified because of the terrible things that had happened there..

But then he takes the next step of warning the people that the same thing would happen to Jerusalem itself. That the people would be reduced to cannibalism—eating their own sons and daughters during the horrific siege to come because the people refused to heed his words.

The priest Pashhur strikes Jeremiah and puts him in prison.

Jeremiah complains to God about feeling trapped—caught between a rock and a hard place—not because of the prison but because of the message that God had given him, "I have become a laughing stock; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!' ...If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name', then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot..." Poor old Jeremiah, stuck with the task of proclaiming a word that no-one wanted to hear, afraid to speak it, unable to hold it back,

Well, it isn't as though Jeremiah was alone—Jesus tells us that
If we follow him, we should expect to be treated as he is
Treated. Look at the names that they have been calling me:
Beelzebub. Do you expect any better treatment yourselves?
And then Jesus tells us not to be afraid of those who can kill the
body but who cannot kill the soul, but rather to fear the One
who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna--that fearful
image of Hell that came straight from Jeremiah..
We are to acknowledge Jesus before others. Shouting it from
the rooftops, if we have to, whispering it with our
children in our prayers at night.

Jesus was right—the result of his message has not been peace on
earth, even if his message is about Peace with God and peace
with one-another. Peace with a God who knows the number
of hairs on our heads, and who knows and cares when a
sparrow falls, and who values us so much more.

The message is about peace but it is peace that is won
through a cross—through an instrument of human
torture, suffering, abuse and death.

Peace that comes from trusting and following this crucified
one--taking up our own crosses and following him.

The message has divided families and it will continue to.

And the ironic thing is, yes, we do continue to pray and work
for peace—that poor worldly peace that the poet G. M.
Hopkins said, "allows alarms of wars, the daunting wars,
the death of it"

We pray and work for the peace of Jerusalem, the peace of
Palestine and Israel, peace in the Middle East, peace around
the world. Peace that is built upon the vision of justice from
prophets like Jeremiah, and St. John Chrysostom and Martin
Luther King,

And we still believe in families, broken and troubled as they may
be, and the blessings of faithful fathers and mothers who
make sacrifices for their children, but who also stand ready
to make even greater sacrifices for their Lord and savior.

But more than these relative values, we believe in the life-giving promise that Jesus made about spending our lives following him—because ultimately that is what Martyrdom is about. Whether you're talking about St. Stephen, or St. John Chrysostom or Martin Luther King. It's not about taking our lives, it's about losing them, by following Jesus, one day at a time.

"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for the sake of Jesus will find it."

I would like to conclude my sermon this morning with a poem by G. M. Hopkins entitled "Peace":

"When will you ever, peace, wild wood-dove, shy wings shut
your round me roaming end, and under by my boughs?

When, when peace? Will you peace?

I'll not play hypocrite; to own my heart,

I'll yield you do come sometimes,

But that piece-meal peace is poor peace.

What pure peace allows alarms of wars, the daunting wars,
The death of it?

O surely reaving peace, my Lord should leave in lieu

some good, and so he does leave Patience exquisite,

That plumes to peace, and when peace here does house,

he comes with work to do, he does not come to coo,

he comes to brood and sit.