

## SUNDAY 12A BIRKENHEAD 2020

The divisions between us seem to be becoming more stark. They seem to be irresolvable. New tensions between various groups keep erupting. Sometimes it's all out war. On other occasions it's attacking each other online. Disruption seems to be the goal. The news we get keeps reminding us that it is often the innocent who suffer. It is worth remembering that also caught up in these conflicts are many Christian groups.

I can't imagine what it is like to be in the minority in a country either at war or where there is famine. Aid usually goes to the majority. It must be a fearful place to be.

2

I wonder what Christians in those countries are feeling on this Sunday when they hear the Gospel reading. "Do not fear those who kill the body but

cannot kill the soul." Of course they fear being killed. We all fear that.

I think the same may be said for those in the United States with the recent riots. There are many people now who live in fear. With some justification fear is a reality for many. This fear is what drives people apart and tries to destroy harmony in our societies.

How then can we hear such a gospel without wondering what Jesus meant? "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."? Surely it is natural to fear those who kill the body. Fear is a very important human emotion.

3

Fear is a strange emotion. It is necessary for it stops us doing foolish things. Fear of being burnt prevents us from touching hot things. Fear of falling prevents us from going too close to the edge of a cliff. But fear can also stop us from doing good things. Fear of not

knowing what to do can stop us helping someone. Fear of the unknown can prevent us from taking a step which may prove to be to our advantage. Sometimes our fears are more imagined than real. One of the ways fears can lose their power is when we talk about them. But we can also be afraid to talk about our fears for fear of appearing foolish.

But when we face our fears, when we talk about our fears, we can use them to motivate us into action. Fear is a very necessary emotion, but an emotion we do well to recognise for what it is, and deal with it.

4

It is interesting that here, and in other parts of the gospels, Jesus always contrasts fear with faith. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, fear is. The fear Jesus speaks about is the fear which is not yet able to trust God. None of us are in the position of being able to trust God completely. So when we are afraid, this is a

chance to ask ourselves what it would be like if the fear was taken away. How would this situation be if I did trust God? We may still not be able to trust, but we start the process of working through our fears to allow the development of faith.

If we have faith, it doesn't mean all our fears disappear. As I said fear can be a good emotion to have and it is necessary to prevent disaster happening. But sometimes our fears are unfounded. Bringing faith to our fear means that we may be able to transform the fear into effective action. Fears are real and not to be ignored. It's what they do to us that can cause the problems. When they paralyse us and prevent action, then we need to question what our fears are doing.

5

Fear can be used to bring about change for good, to our benefit and the benefit of others.

In the particular passage we read this morning we do well to remember that Jesus is giving instructions to his disciples. He tells them that following him will not

be easy. There will be divisions brought about by the gospel, Confrontation is unavoidable. A gospel that bothers no one and questions nothing is no longer the gospel.

I sometimes wonder if we in NZ have become too comfortable with the gospel. Maybe the apathy of people is the difficulty we have to deal with.

Fortunately we are not at war as so many countries are at present. Yet that doesn't mean we are at peace either. We may in fact be killing people in ways we don't know.

6

Figuratively speaking, at some time in our lives we kill off those we do not like; those we find difficult; those who irritate us; those who disturb us. We separate them from our company; we put barriers up so they can't belong. We ignore their needs and hope the people will go away. These are the ways we kill off

certain people. Then we wonder why these people retaliate. Of course sometimes the tables are turned and we are the ones on the outer, we are the ones others are trying to kill off. That's when we want to retaliate. We find ways of hitting back, returning evil for evil, or holding a grudge against the perpetrators of this unkindness towards us. It seems that is a human condition. It seems to be where much of the conflict of our world lies. The difficulty is how to change the need to retaliate into a constructive way of bringing about justice so relationships can be restored.

7

We are dealing with subjects well beyond our capacity to change on a world level. But maybe we can do something on the local level. Our own conflicts may need resolution. Our own wish to retaliate may need to be withheld. Our own fears may need to be faced up to. When we do then we are starting the process

of allowing our faith to have an effect in our living. Yes, fear of those who kill is natural. Self protection is normal. But some fears are better dealt with to allow us to have the sort of relationships God asks of us. Healing our own conflicts is the place to start. Who knows what wider effect this may have when we are willing to follow the way of Christ.