

SERMON 22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD

JORDAN GREATBATCH

Every time there is an election we often hear the phrase that Religion should be kept out of politics, and vice versa. However as much we want to believe that, it is undeniable that the two are intimately connected in our modern world just as they were in Jesus' day.

In our Gospel today Jesus bluntly informs his disciples that some of their influential religious or community leaders (the elders, chief priest and scribes) will inflict great violence upon him and kill him. The chief priest and elders will conspire with Caiaphas, the high priest, to covertly arrest and kill Jesus. And Judas, a member of Jesus' inner circle, together with a sword-and-club-carrying mob, will join the conspiracy.

"Religion" has never been free of political intrigue and violence. Even religious men and women mesmerized by power and privilege will annihilate persons who in any way threaten to diminish their position and advantage. Perhaps the chief priest, elders, and high priest, despite also being colonized subjects of the Roman Empire, have positioned themselves to partake of the spoils and privileges of empire. Perhaps they have convinced enough of the masses of ordinary poor people to act

contrary to their own best interest and to join in a cause that favours only the rich and powerful.

Jesus as the king of the Jews or God's Christ/Messiah is obviously a threat to the status quo. His mere existence as an infant constituted a threat to King Herod, Rome's client king and to the extent that Herod was willing to murder all children under two years old in and around Bethlehem to assure the annihilation of the one who might someday replace him as Rome's puppet with privileges. Freedom is sometimes surrendered by even the oppressed for privileges and advantages of empire. Herod could rely on the chief priest and scribes to cooperate with his murderous agenda. Religion can often be political and the political religious.

Sometimes even members of the intimate circle of a revolutionary band don't yet know what it means to be a revolutionary. The colonized Jesus envisions a *kingdom* that prioritizes justice/righteousness, promotes neighbour love that is defined and motivated by God-love and self-love, is not charmed by wealth, position and authority, is not dreaming of becoming Rome's puppet king or of occupying an earthly throne, and is anticipating an imminent disgraceful death.¹

Been a revolutionary is dangerous business. And so not able to inhabit that space with Jesus, Peter scolds him. Pulling Jesus aside, Peter chastises him, as if Jesus has lost faith. Many religious folks will not or cannot abide sisters and brothers who demonstrate anything but faith in their talk. Christians sometimes can't mourn any impending or actual loss

without being accused of having lost their faith. Grief and mourning are natural human reactions to loss. God created us to be human and declared our humanness to be good.

And so in our Gospel Peter has assumed the role of adversary, or Satan, in light of Jesus' revelation of his fate as a revolutionary. Jesus accuses Peter of being a stumbling block (not a rock) and of focusing on "human things" rather than "divine things". Returning to addressing all of his disciples, Jesus admonishes them: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Of all the Gospel truths this has to be one of the most challenging. It flies in the face of all our natural instincts for security and self-preservation. Whilst the truth of the Gospel is for all people, I am not so sure if this self-denying principle is to be applied in a blanket manner. I don't think Jesus is calling us all to do as say St Francis did and abandon everything in our service to God. Most of us have responsibilities, families and jobs and people who rely on us. So how do we apply this teaching of Jesus in a realistic way in our lives? Well we have to avoid extremes and hold a balance.

For this was a new teaching in light of Jesus' imminent death. If Jesus' disciples choose to continue following him, they must be willing to deny themselves and be able to envision the fate of the cross. Not all of us are in that situation even if we wanted to be. And then you have Judas, who as we know had it backwards; he thought he could pursue money and power and

then follow in Jesus' steps. For Judas didn't believe that Jesus would really lead them to the cross. And so often we think that surely our faith cannot lead us to the cross. We have to be open to the fact that it might, as unrealistic as it sounds.

In the end we must face this uncomfortable truth. For Jesus taught that "the one who wants to save his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit him if he gains the whole world but forfeits his life? Or what will he give in return for his life?" These words are reminiscent of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness: The devil dared Jesus to save his life (by turning stones into bread so that he could eat), lose his life (to cast himself down off the highest point of the Temple mount and God's angels would save him), and to gain the world while forfeiting his life (to acquire all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshiping the Satan).

Before beginning his public ministry Jesus settled the question of his priorities; he sided with the poor who do not have the power to turn stones into bread; he refused to trivialize life and sided with those who are defenceless from the daily onslaught of violence; and he turned down ill-gotten material prosperity and power based on loyalties and partnerships with evil and oppressive forces.

Perhaps Jesus is also saying that if one thinks they have it all figured out (like Peter), they do not; that when we think our theology and faith is tight, right, and infallible, it just might be oppressive and death-dealing. Peter declares that his loyalty to Jesus will withstand the threat of death; that though the crowds

forsake Jesus, he will not. We sometimes prefer to see Peter as weak, rather than as human. Perhaps Peter saw himself as superhuman. I don't think Jesus calls us to deny our humanity but to commit to following him while fully accepting how vulnerable our humanity will be if we choose to follow on that path. I think one of the most pressing issues facing our world at the moment is that we have forgotten our common humanity, the simple yet profound idea that we are all 'made in the image of God.' It is much easier to demonise and ignore someone's humanity in order to treat them badly. We see this on both sides of the social and political divide. That's in essence why we are drifting further and further apart in our dialogue. We must once again find common ground in our belief that no matter who you are, Peter the Apostle or Joe Blogs, in following Jesus we will all fail, but God is there to offer us another chance.

Jesus was willing to be God's Messiah knowing the violence that could be done to his body as a consequence of pursuing justice, love and peace instead of the privileges of empire. May we have the strength to do the same.