

## SUNDAY 20C BIRKENHEAD 2022

When I was on a retreat once, the director asked me to do something which I found a little disturbing. I was asked to draw a graph of my relationship with God. When did I feel God was most active in my life and when least active. Having done that, I was then asked to draw a graph of my major life events. This was done on clear plastic and then overlaid on the original graph of my spiritual life. Then there was yet another which was about my emotional life. This too was overlaid on the original graph. The outcome of all this was quite an interesting discovery. It became clear that the growth points in my life were the times when I was in conflict, or in some form of struggle with life events. Conflict, uncertainty, insecurity, depression, difficulty; these were the times which also produced the greatest growth. These were also the times when I could see God most active in my life.

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I was not prepared for that outcome as I would have thought I should try to avoid things like conflict. Yet clearly this is when growth happened, when God seemed nearest, when life became more fulfilling.

The retreat director even suggested that this was also true for parishes as much as for individuals. We are certainly in one of those times now.

This seems so contrary to what we normally hear about Jesus And about the church. If you think of what we say about Jesus at Christmas we talk about him being the prince of peace. Surely he was one who desired peace, in other words the absence of conflict. Much else in Jesus life would lead us to see a person for whom the absence of conflict was paramount. Everything he did was an attempt to get rid of things which spoil life, and surely conflict is one of those.

3

Today's Gospel is a reminder to us that the getting to peace and the absence of conflict is a costly process. Jesus too had his own conflicts to endure before this state of perfection could come about. Jesus was seeking to get rid of all those things which spoil life, and in so doing he came into conflict with others. There are always people who will benefit from holding on to the things which spoil the lives of others. Whenever anyone tries to get rid of the benefits that some are enjoying at the expense of others there will be conflict. That's exactly what brought Jesus into conflict with others. For him the conflict led to the cross. For anyone who holds the Christian faith and practices it, conflict will be the inevitable outcome. It seems the only way to the crown is through the cross. This is becomingly the case in a world that is increasingly hostile to faith.

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Today's gospel must be one of the most difficult of Jesus sayings. It is a reminder to us that if we take up this life of Christianity it will not be a bed of roses. No it's not all sweetness and light as we try to follow the way of the cross. Love is not just a nice feeling; love consists of actions which change things. Change, as we know, always brings conflict and pain. Yet this is exactly what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel.

When Jesus says he has come to bring fire on the earth he is talking about Pentecostal fire. This is not a destructive fire, but a refining and purifying fire. This is the fire of the Holy Spirit who enlivens us for our mission. This fire is the fire of love, and as we know love changes us. So yes this fire will bring us into conflict.

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Then Jesus talks about a baptism with which he must be baptised. This is the baptism of crucifixion. This is the death and resurrection into which we too are baptised. It's a shame that resurrection can only come after crucifixion. Life comes after death. Jesus is reminding us of the reality of this life.

Then the worst of all is that Jesus reminds us that sometimes standing with him brings, not peace, but division. Families will be divided because of his message. Sometimes this happens to people here as they struggle with the Christian faith, when their family and friends do not share their views. Those who live in countries where another faith dominates can be completely ostracised by their family and friends and often have to move away from them completely.

Of course we see the cost of holding the Christian faith in countries like Syria and Egypt where Christians are being persecuted and killed and churches are destroyed.

6

These hard sayings of Jesus are a reminder of the realities of a life which seeks to follow the Gospel. Don't look for ease. But do look for the joy of new life and a satisfying life as we, like Jesus, seek to get rid of all that spoils life.

These difficulties which occur as we try to get rid of the things which spoil life are not simply to be seen for us as individuals. Unfortunately the Christian faith needs to be worked out in a more public arena. This means that we have things to say to our society and so this will also bring us into conflict. How does the church speak about what we see that needs to be changed in our society. How do we speak about those things which spoil life that we need to eradicate? How can we say things about child abuse, about poverty, about real discrimination? We may not even be in agreement about any of these or related topics to begin with. It seems to me that we have a responsibility to at least try in order that we may make some effort to improve the lives of our people.

7

We also have to be aware that when we do we may well end up in conflict as a result. But speak we must if we are to have any credibility in society. This was of course what prophets like Jeremiah of the Old Testament were doing. They were speaking God's word to their people, in order to keep them faithful to the God who had called them. Sometimes this meant saying hard things about the need for people to change their ways. As a result there was conflict. But the prophets also knew that what they were saying was in the end about God and what God would do for his people. They were helping people to realise that in the end it was God that mattered and that God would have the final say.

8

We too know that God has had the last word in Jesus. Our faith tells us that because of the resurrection we have the victory in Christ. As we seek to continue the work of Christ by getting rid of the things which spoil life we seek also to remember Christ's victory. In the midst of our own conflicts we are assured that the fire of the Spirit will refine us by love for the work we are called to do. The promise of this Eucharist is that we are so filled with the life of Christ we too will use his love for all. Conflict, yes; but also the knowledge that we are allowing the Holy Spirit to fire us with love; a love which changes things; a love which seeks to get rid of all that spoils life. Then all will be made whole in him.