

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

I have been part of an interesting exercise during the last couple of weeks. The Year 11 students at St. Francis de Sales College have been interviewing people for their research program in Religious Studies. After I had visited their classrooms most of the interviews took place by way of email questions and responses. What struck me was that students saw divisions in places where I didn't see them, and at other times I needed to point to divisions that the students had not seen. Some students were exploring divisions between science and religion, between creation and evolution that were not there. Some were exploring matters of sexuality that needed careful division. Some were discovering the leadership in Church Teaching about the care for the earth that they had not seen before.

Today we explore some of the divisions that are created when a person speaks out in the name of God. The Prophet Jeremiah created so much division that many people wanted to kill him. The people of Jerusalem did not accept that God was speaking through the prophet to warn them that the only way that they and Jerusalem would be safe was for them to surrender to the king of Babylon. The word of the prophet was not a word that they wanted to hear. They threw Jeremiah into a muddy well and left him there to die. If it was not for Ebed-

melech, Jeremiah would have ended his earthly life at the bottom of that well.

In Luke's gospel Jesus is very much the prophet who has come to speak in the name of God to the people that God loves. But not everyone was ready to recognise Jesus as God's prophet. Not everyone was ready to hear the word that he was proclaiming. Today he speaks about how that will affect the families and communities who were called to accept his word.

Jesus tells us that he had come to bring fire to the earth. He was anxious for this fire to be already blazing. What Jesus is saying could be understood in two ways. We can think of fire as a purifying agent, burning up the branches of the tree that are not bearing fruit, branches that have been cut off and thrown into the fire. But Luke also associates fire with the coming of the Holy Spirit. We can understand what he says about Baptism in two ways also. Jesus talks about his own death as a Baptism, or he could be talking about the Baptism in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In either case there is prophet urgency for these things to happen.

And when they do, families and communities will become divided. Some will accept Jesus the prophet. Others will not. Some will welcome the light that Jesus brings. Others will turn away and walk into the darkness.

The earliest communities of Christians were well aware of this happening. Only some of the Jewish people who heard Christ or heard about him became his followers. Families were divided. Those from pagan backgrounds also had to make choices for or against Jesus when the gospel was proclaimed to them.

Perhaps we have experienced division within our own families because some members have become people of faith and others have not. Most Catholics marry someone who does not share their Catholic faith. Blessed are those whose non catholic partners support them in the practice of their faith and their commitment to hand that faith onto their children. Perhaps it is when these children have grown up and taken responsibility for their own lives that divisions appear in families. Many parents lament that their children do not practice the faith that they had done so much to share with them. Many parents find it very difficult to accept the path that their children take when they seem to choose other values to live by. At least within our own families we take the time to look beyond the externals to try to find where God's love is at work in the lives of those we love.

What may be much more difficult for us is to consistently live in the way that Jesus leads us when the people around us do not share the values that we have learnt from Jesus. To be honest and fair when others

seem to turn a blind eye to dishonesty is hard. To look for the best in others in a world that seems to delight in disclosing everyone's faults is not easy to do. People often call us foolish when we are generous. Choosing to spend time in quiet and prayer is not a popular pastime. Making a commitment to gather to celebrate Eucharist as often as we can is not a commitment that the majority of Catholics make today. When we try to live as disciples of Jesus it is so easy to feel that we are the odd ones out.

And yet we know that this is what gives us life. It is our relationship with Jesus that gives meaning to our lives. It is our deep trust in his love for us that we can firmly hold onto when other aspects of our lives are falling apart. Jesus warns us today that when we choose the path to follow him, we choose a different path from most other people.

As I replied to the students who had asked me to answer their question for their Religious Studies Project, I was trying to encourage them to keep exploring the richness of our faith. Perhaps their generation more than any other will need to keep looking for the one who has overcome all divisions, the one in whom we can put all our hope and trust.