

Readings for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

25th June 2023

First Reading: Genesis 21:8-21

The child Isaac grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.' The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Second Reading: Romans 6:1b-11

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: St Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus summoned the twelve and sent them out with the following instruction: 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they

have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For 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 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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

A Reflection for the fourth Sunday after Pentecost

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." Matthew 10:34.

There are times when the words of Jesus can be so challenging that we are tempted to ignore them and to quickly pass over them, rather than to face up to them. Today's gospel reading is one that needs to be addressed if we are to take our call as Christians seriously.

The context of the reading is that Jesus is giving his twelve apostles detailed instructions of what they are to expect when they go out into the world to tell of the coming of God's kingdom. He tells them to go and preach that the coming of God's kingdom is near, and to do this both in words and in action, through acts of healing; to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers. Jesus tells them that in doing this they will not always be appreciated; indeed, he prepares them for rejection and persecution. They will be seen by some as a challenge to worldly powers. The kingdom that the disciples are charged to preach is one that is the alternative to all worldly kingdoms that rule through violence and by the fear of death.

When Jesus says he has not come to bring peace to the earth but a sword, he seems to contradict so much that was said by himself and others. After his birth, Jesus was taken by Joseph and Mary to the temple, where they were greeted by Zachariah who proclaimed that this child is destined to give a light to the gentiles and to guide our feet in the path of peace. Likewise, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that 'blessed is the peacemaker for they shall be called sons of God'.

So why in today's reading does he say that he has not come to bring peace to the earth but a sword?

When Jesus sent his disciples out into the villages and cities, he tells them to go in peace and to speak a blessing of peace on the families where they are made welcomed and who accept their message, but to be prepared for

rejection. He tells them, "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust from your feet and leave that house or town". The sword that Jesus brings is the division that is a result of his message; it is the division between those who accept it and those who reject it. It is the inevitable consequence of Jesus' message but not its purpose.

The sword that Jesus brings is not a sword of God's judgement, nor of military action or personal violence. It is a sword that separates and divides; that separates justice from injustice, truth from falsehood. It is the sword of God's love and peace – remember, Jesus never advocated violence but only love and peace.

The love that Jesus spoke of is a cantankerous thing. Yes, love is kind and gentle, but sometimes it is also offensive, disruptive and uncomfortable. It is a love that can get you into trouble. It can get you put in prison. It can get you killed. It was the kind of love that landed Jesus on the cross. And when Jesus spoke of peace, it was not an easy peace. As Doctor Martin Luther King once said, peace is not the absence of some negative force, war, tension, confusion, but it is the presence of some positive force. It is justice, good will and the power of the kingdom of God.

We experience peace when people live in relationship with God and each other; when we act with integrity and justice, especially in lifting up the needs, dignity and freedom of the poor and marginalised and when we stand up for the whole of God's creation.

Such ideas of love and peace are not theoretical or other worldly, remember it was for this love and this peace that Doctor Martin Luther King himself was killed.

Like God's kingdom it is something that can in part be grasped now in how we live our daily lives. The disciples were sent out not only to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom but to participate in it through healing work, to participate in God's restoration of peace for the whole of his kingdom, a creation that God will ultimately make new, but that is restored by living today by God's will, so that all may flourish.

We proclaim the kingdom of God when we practice love, mercy and compassion to all, including ourselves; when we recognise our own needs and the brokenness of our lives and we seek help to heal that brokenness.

We proclaim the kingdom of God when we care for one another's wounds, when we act as healers, as peace builders in one another's lives; whether it is to heal concepts of God, or to care and steward God's good creation, or to love neighbour and enemy in the present.

But there is more: beyond loving and caring for each other or neighbours, our enemies and to tend and care for God's creation, we are to confront the systems and cultures of violence, domination and oppression that ultimately harm us all and the whole of God's creation.

This week I visited a crofter, George Macpherson, whose family had done just that, not so long ago and not so far away, in Glendale in Skye. They were a community of crofters who faced clearance off their land by their landlord and who resisted any attempt to evict them. The landlord and their factor had the legal right to evict them, and things escalated to such a level that the Government sent gunboats with 350 marines to enforce the law. These crofters resisted the law and a military force through nonviolent action. In the face of intimidation by the landlords and the army, they refused to back down and a number ended up in prison, but they maintained a clear belief that nonviolent civil disobedience was the way to resist the law. They were led by people of great wisdom, a wisdom that came both

from the depth of their history and culture and from their Christian faith. Their spokesperson, John MacPherson, could write and speak in both English and Gaelic, which was rare at that time, and they were strongly influenced by local lay church leaders who encouraged them to remain faithful to the God of peace and the peacemaker Christ. A few local clergy supported them, but there were far more clergy at that time who were more focused on the folly and sin of the individual rather than the suffering of the people evicted; who were adamant that the people being cleared off the land should be obedient and submit to the authorities, even when they were acting unjustly. It is remarkable that these people held the conviction that nonviolence was the way to witnessing to the truth, despite what the law said. It was in part due to the actions of these people of faith that the Crofters Act was passed in 1886.

Jesus tells us to speak out when we see injustice, he says *What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.*

He tells us not to be afraid to speak out, for no force is more powerful against oppression than truthful speech. God's love makes possible a confidence that drives out the fear of those who use violence and who kill to compel obedience to their will. Remember the words of Jesus, 'Blessed are the peacemakers because they will be called sons of God'.