

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Priorities

Rev. Catherine Buchan
Sunday 25th September 2011

Micah 7:1-7

Matthew 10:34-42

If there is one thing that we like to think that Jesus cares about, one thing that we trust he will give us, it is peace. We pray for it day by day, week by week. We celebrate at Christmas because the angels said that his birth would mean "Peace on Earth". We offer God's peace to each other when we take communion. And here is Jesus saying that this is not what he came to do after all! Are we so very wrong then? Did he come specifically to sow discord, after all? The church and religion in general has often been accused of being an agent for violence, war and strife. Are the accusations based upon Jesus' intentions?

Or was Jesus looking around at his own land, at the various factions which already existed, and at the way that he could see he was dividing people's opinions, and realised that although he came to bring peace with God, it was not going to be the obvious result, not for a long time. Maybe he looked at the way that his own family was opposed to him, maybe he saw his heterogeneous group of disciples and the way that they could not always agree, and realised that those who were called and committed as disciples would not find that the world lay down in peace before them, would not find that their lives flowed on in untroubled pattern. It wasn't his intention, but discord was going to be a direct consequence of what he was doing and calling his followers to do. Not peace but a sword. Jesus is here giving a solemn warning to those who he is also asking to be completely committed to him. Following him will not always be easy or untroubled. He has said it before in different ways, and now he underlines the point by talking about what most of us hold dear: family.

Why is it that so many times the children of Christian parents do not follow in their faith? It happens. It happens a lot, and it is a real grief, even to some of you here today, I know. Many of us who are parents wonder what we did wrong that what is so important to us, that the person who is so important to us, Jesus himself, can seem to mean so little to our own children. When they are small we can do our best to mould them and teach them. We can encourage them to know the Bible stories and to pray, we can tell them about how much we trust God ourselves, and gently teach them of God's forgiveness for them given in Jesus. And some children seem to accept and understand and simply go from strength to strength, while others, at a certain age, just turn around and say "No. It's not for me." When that happens it is a real grief, to us and to our and their heavenly Father.

It can happen the other way too, though we may not see it so often. It can be that children brought up to have no faith or only a nominal faith can discover Christ and his love for themselves, in such a way that they centre their lives around him, and their parents can not understand it. I remember once hearing of a young woman, of a fairly well-off family, who had attended an Alpha course run by her local church (this was in the north of Scotland) and coming to have a real and committed faith for the first time. One of the things she decided that as a follower of Christ she should do was to give a tenth of her income to God's work. Her parents were appalled. They had brought her up to respect the church, but they hadn't expected such radical discipleship. This, they said, was not how they expected their money to be used.

A friend of mine discovered the love of Jesus in a real way shortly after leaving school. For most of her adult life she has been service God overseas, nearly always in dangerous places - Yemen, Nepal, Afghanistan, to the incomprehension of her mother and family.

Jesus knew that this would happen. When he said that he came to divide families, he didn't mean that he intended that this should happen and that this would be a good thing. He meant that this was what would happen naturally, as a consequence of the sort of discipleship that he was asking of his disciples. It is what happens when one member of a family lives with the sort of integrity that we saw last week. It is what may happen when we make following Jesus our priority. Again Jesus wants his disciples to know what might be involved in following him before they go out and work and witness in his name. His own family did not understand, after all. His mother and brothers tried to stop him on one occasion, and even said he must be mad. (John 7:5) As we read last week, "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household." (v:25)

Our commitment to Christ divides us in society, of course. But it can divide us within families even more profoundly. And that is because we naturally think that within a family, our priorities will be each other. The parent's priority will be the children. The children's priorities - at least in Jesus' society - and still in close families - will be in pleasing their parents. But when following Jesus becomes our priority, this is resented by those in the family who do not share that idea.

Actually, in this part of Jesus' instruction of his disciples, he is almost quoting from the passage in the book of Micah which we read. Jesus is saying that following him will overturn the expected norms, the expected order of priority which people have in their lives. And this will be resented. People like to cling to what they know and like life to go the way that they expect. Micah shows what happens when people want to cling to what they know and what they enjoy before anything. People start to look out for their own interest. The official and the judge take bribes - they will do anything to remain in office. When everyone is for themselves, you don't know who to trust. Even families become divided. But Micah, the man of God, says that his priority is God. He will look to the Lord. His family might well say that he is the problem.

Jesus is not saying that caring for our families is unimportant. He is not saying that the family structure is unimportant to God: God would never style himself our heavenly Father if he did not believe in the idea of family - which is, after all, his own invention! The New Testament has a good deal to say about caring for our families, and this passage should not be taken as licence just to forget our dependants and spend all our time on "the Lord's work", as though care for the family was not also God's work.

But what Jesus is saying here is also not giving us an excuse to put the family first. Jesus is not saying that we should compromise our priorities to put family before him and living his way. When our children fail to understand and embrace our faith in God it may or may not be our fault. But it is more likely to be our fault if we have *not* shown the priority of Christ in our lives. If we have compromised our faith to accommodate other priorities, then we have not given true witness to its importance to us, or the way that faith in God moulds our lives. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, says Jesus. If our actions have said that we will worship God or work with his people to spread the gospel, only when the family don't want us to do something else, then our lives are denying what we say about the importance of our faith. Making Christ our priority may often have the consequence that other members of our family do not understand and even turn against us. But *not* doing so means that we are not bearing witness to the vital importance that Christ has in our lives.

Jesus says that we have to love him more. We can't be half-hearted disciples. We can't sit on the fence. It may at times feel as though we are losing our lives: everything that we love may seem to turn from us. But if we allow even that, we will discover that in fact life is what we will find. That's the promise.

Still, it is a tough message; there is no doubt about it.

If the instructions in discipleship were to end there, then I expect the twelve would have turned tail and run away. I expect you would. I'm pretty sure that I would. But Jesus has one more thing to remind us of before he sends out his disciples to do his work. When we go in his name, we go as him. He is so closely involved with us that when people welcome us they are welcoming him, and welcoming God himself. Following Christ is not always the big things or the difficult things. It can be as simple as giving a cup of cold water to a thirsty traveller, coming in the name of Christ. And the welcome given and the welcome received will not go unnoticed, will not go unrewarded.

For these is a reward offered. This may worry some people who think that Jesus is almost trying to bribe people to follow him and live his way with his promise of reward. But it is not like that. And if it were, then the integrity of the follower would be seriously compromised. We are not expected to follow because of our hope of a reward. But the one we follow is God's Son, the Son of our loving heavenly Father, and he is generous and wanting to reward us. He is one of these parents who is looking for excuses to celebrate, to give a treat, to reward the children.

So, if we welcome a prophet into our midst, simply because he or she is a prophet, then all of us get to share the reward of that faithful servant: the party is for the whole family. If we welcome someone who is righteous: who does right even as Jesus did, then we too get to share the reward. If we give the smallest thing to someone because they are servants of Christ, then we become associated with their service.

So there may be strife and division in our families because of our faithful witness to Christ, because we do as he asks and make him our first priority. But that does not mean that we are cut off and asked to plough on alone. God is our heavenly Father. He works in families, and where our own do not support us, he gives us his. He loves us and is ever looking for reasons to include us with others, and to allow us to share their rewards and them to share the rewards of our faithfulness. Our faith is in God and our commitment is to Christ; but because of that, we are given each other, and bound together with all God's children so that wherever our lives touch in ministry, in love, in welcome, we share God's special blessing.

Thanks be to God for all his gifts of love. Amen.