

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, 2013
(Hebrews 11.29-12.2; Luke 12.49-56)

This morning's Gospel makes rather shocking reading. Jesus may be called the Prince of Peace, but listen to his words,

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Luke 12.51-3).

Far from being words of reassurance, these statements of Jesus' seem to confirm the world's judgement that Christianity, rather than bringing peace, is an active cause of bloodshed and disaster. How can they come from Jesus' lips?

Perhaps the most important rule, when it comes to reading the Bible, is to try to understand what we are reading within the wider context of the story. Jesus never speaks in a vacuum, he always speaks within a particular situation, and we need to understand the context and the situation within which he was speaking if we are going to make sense of what he says. Besides, although the four Gospels present us with recognizably similar pictures of Jesus, each Evangelist is like a portrait artist who chooses to depict Jesus in a slightly different light.

Saint Luke, from whose Gospel these words come, perhaps more than the other three Evangelists, manages to portray Jesus in a wonderfully humanitarian light; and yet Saint Luke, perhaps more than Matthew and Mark, also makes us aware – from the first moment of Jesus' active ministry – that conflict will attend its course (see Luke 4.16-30).

Unlike Mark, whose Jesus erupts from nowhere, and Matthew, who traces Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham, the Father of the Jewish race, Luke takes Jesus' genealogy right back to Adam, thereby suggesting that Jesus' mission was not just for the benefit of the Jewish people, but a gift to the human race. And Luke's humanitarian portrait of Jesus is further enriched by the fact that Luke alone transmits some of Jesus' most compassionate parables and actions: the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), Jesus' welcome of the woman who anoints his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair (Luke 7), and his reception of Zacchaeus (Luke 19) would be obvious examples. Yet it is Saint Luke, more than Matthew and Mark, (cp Matthew 10 34-39), who also stresses the divisive nature of Jesus' calling.

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How can it be that Jesus, who was so obviously good, and who displays such startling compassion and humanitarian sympathy, can also be an agent of division?

The reason is not far to seek. Ironically, it stems directly from Jesus' humanitarian concern. The 'medicine' of the Gospel, the Good News Jesus came to bring, although it offers life and health, acts like an acid when it encounters the false Gods around which we so easily construct our lives: pride, untruth, power, possessiveness, and vainglorious religion.

The freedom Jesus offers, the healing he comes to bring, consists not in inviting us to step into some spiritual sauna, where all our prejudices will be carefully massaged and preserved, but into a radically different world in which God's universal love will be the order of the day. On the one hand, this transcends our wildest hopes and dreams, on the other hand, it involves death to our selfish self-concerns. This morning's collect captures well the ambivalence we are likely to feel towards this difficult exchange,

Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we to pray
and to give more than either we desire or deserve:
pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid
and giving us those good things
which we are not worthy to ask
but through the merits and mediation
of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

God may always be more ready to hear than we to pray – what a wonderful recognition of our ambivalence towards God – and to forgive those things of which our conscience is afraid; we can hide behind our guilt. Yet – and maybe this is the rub – God wants to give more than either we desire or deserve. Gifts of our own choosing might be OK, but what if God proves to be too generous a lover? Am I, are you, prepared for the demands of unconditional love?

I was asking myself this question last Wednesday, when the lectionary recalled the life of Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan friar and priest, who was murdered in Auschwitz concentration camp on August 14th, 1941.

Born in Poland in 1894, Maximilian Kolbe entered the Franciscan novitiate in 1910. Having completed his studies for the priesthood in Poland and in Rome he was then active in Franciscan life, founding communities as far afield as Japan. When Poland was invaded, at the beginning of World War Two, Kolbe was involved in trying to rescue Jewish people under threat from the Nazis, going as far as to hide 2,000 Jews in his own friary. He also ran a resistance radio station, SP3RN, which criticised Nazi activity and propaganda.

On February 17th 1941, he was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo. On May 25 was transferred to Auschwitz I as prisoner #16670.

In July 1941 a man from Kolbe's barracks vanished, prompting the deputy camp commander to pick 10 men from the same barracks to be starved to death in Block 13, which was notorious for torture. (The man who had disappeared was later found, drowned in the camp latrine.) One of the selected men, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out "God help my wife and children". On hearing this, Father Kolbe volunteered to take his place.

During the time in the cell he led the men in songs and prayer. After three weeks of dehydration and starvation, only Kolbe and three others were still alive. Finally he was murdered with an injection of carbolic acid.

In a most touching coda to this story, Father Kolbe was beatified by Pope Paul VI in 1971 and canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 10, 1982 in the presence of Franciszek Gajowniczek – the man whose place he had taken - along with his wife and children and grandchildren.

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Maximilian Kolbe worked for peace – we can think of the prayer of Saint Francis, the founder of his community, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace". And yet, when cruelty and oppression seemed to reign, at a time when most people would have been trying to save themselves, he responded to the call of God's unconditional love.

In 1941, the deputy camp commander must have thought that he had crushed Kolbe and all he stood for like a fly, and yet we cherish his memory, both because he displays the wonderful humanity of Jesus, as portrayed in Saint Luke's Gospel, and also because he was not prepared to be passive in the face of evil. He fought oppression, but his weapon was love.

Tragically, under Nazi oppression, many families were divided 'three against two and two against three . . . : father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law'. I guess it is the same wherever terror holds the day.

Please God, it is most unlikely that we will ever find ourselves in such a situation. Nevertheless, Kolbe's example can encourage and challenge us, as we seek to respond to Jesus' humanitarian call and find ourselves struggling – as Kolbe himself must have struggled – with all the forces inside us which oppose the call of universal love.

Christopher Mackenna, 18 August,

2013