

**A sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2020**

There was many years ago a scholar of Trinity College, Dublin called Mahaffy who, when asked, “Are you a Christian?”, replied, “Yes, but not offensively so.” Meaning that he did not allow Christianity to compromise his social standing among his peers. Ever since Jesus brought the good news of salvation to a fallen world people have been diluting his message. But a lukewarm Christianity is really not worthy of the name of Christ. Christianity, when properly applied, can set people at odds with the world around them. Jesus told his followers in uncompromising language: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth”, he says. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

For the apostles and those early Christians, required to take the oath to the godhead of the emperor Caesar, acknowledging Jesus as Lord often cost them their lives. Jesus sent the apostles out into the world to proclaim the good news, and this is what he told them to expect: “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves...Beware of them, for they will hand you over to the councils and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me...you will be hated by all because of my name.”

Jesus’ honesty about what to expect is taken a step further when he tells his followers: “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 their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” It would be tempting to ignore what Jesus is saying here, because it seems he is striking at the heart of our human society, which is built upon family relationships. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. What he is seeking to do is to establish the hierarchy of these relationships in the order which God intended. In this hierarchy, faithfulness to God always comes before faithfulness to one’s family members.

There is another reason Jesus says this. He wants to create family groups that are not dependent on blood ties. In fact, that is the aim of all religions. This church, you being here today, is a good example of a family whose

father is God in heaven and whose brothers and sisters are sitting alongside you in the pews.

Of course Jesus' words may be literally true. Nothing is sadder than families divided because of religion, and today's reading recognizes that this is one of the costs of following Jesus. Those early Jewish Christians would have identified with Jesus' words immediately, for to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah would have brought rejection and persecution from the more orthodox members of their families and communities. So, given the enormous personal cost to those affected, what makes us, in spite of everything, turn to Jesus?

Listen again to our first reading, from the prophet Jeremiah. "If I say: 'I will not mention him, or speak any more his name', then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up within my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." God is always reaching out to us. He seeks out the company of the needy, the broken and the poor in spirit. God knows the difficulties we face - in an evil and corrupt world we can sometimes be a lone voice of protest. The burning fire of his love is ultimately an irresistible force when we are ready to turn to him for strength and protection.

The sword that Jesus wields is not to kill, but to protect. It is the sword of truth which defends and protects our souls from corruption, from conforming too closely with the world and all its temptations. Jesus tells us, "do not be afraid." When he touches our hearts, let us take courage and follow him. Let us be his voice in the world now, speaking the truth, since whenever we do that, he will acknowledge us before his Father in heaven.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford