

**Sunday 14th August 2016 (12<sup>th</sup> after Trinity)**

**St Faith, Havant**

**8.00am – Mass & 9.30am – Parish Mass**

*Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; St Luke 12:49-56*

Most Sundays in our Eucharist, we echo again the song of the angels announcing to the shepherds the birth of Jesus – “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth”. That story is near the beginning of the Gospel according to St Luke – chapter 2 verse 14 is the exact reference for that proclamation of peace, in case you want to check. At the start of Jesus’ earthly life: peace.

Skip forward to the end of the Gospel according to St Luke. After Jesus’ resurrection, just before his ascension into heaven. Chapter 24 verse 36, for those who are checking: “Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” At the end of Jesus’ earthly life: peace.

Here we are this morning right in the middle of the Gospel according to St Luke, near the end of chapter 12. Jesus is well-established in his public ministry – at the beginning of chapter 12, we read that “the crowd gathered in thousands, so that they trampled on one another”. This is Jesus the pop star. At the heart of his earthly life: peace?

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No! I tell you, but rather division.”

In the *Chronicles of Narnia* books, the human children who variously find themselves in Narnia are often reminded that Aslan is ‘not a tame lion’. Aslan, as I’m sure most of you already know, is C S Lewis’s allegorical representation of Jesus. And I think there’s a trap we too often and too easily fall into – that of creating for ourselves a ‘tame Jesus’. We like the Jesus who dines with people, who takes the little children into his arms, who weeps at Lazarus’s grave, who tells people to ‘love one another’ and ‘turn the other cheek’. The one who says ‘peace be with you’ and shares a fish barbeque breakfast on the beach. We like that Jesus. Most people do, even those who wouldn’t call themselves Christians. But that’s a ‘tame Jesus’. It completely ignores the Jesus who drove the money-changers out of the temple by force, who told regular stories about how the wicked would be burned with unending fire, who frequently told his audience that they were ‘fools’ and ‘hypocrites’, who called one of his own chosen disciples ‘Satan’. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild? Not a bit of it. Our Lord is definitely not a tame lion.

The gospels are full of stories and sayings of Jesus that might feel difficult to us, that might jar with our own ideas about what Jesus was like. Things that remind us he’s not a ‘tame Jesus’. Today’s gospel reading is certainly one of those difficult

sayings. But however difficult they are, we have a responsibility to face them, to attempt to understand them, and to work out what they might be saying to each of us. We cannot ignore them, block them from our minds because they don't fit the 'tame Jesus' that everybody likes. Doing so would be irresponsible and unfaithful. So – what is Jesus saying here?

As Christians, we are called to a very unusual and very difficult life, because we are called to a life that is lived simultaneously in two very different realities. We have the reality of this earth, imperfect and broken by sin; and we have the reality of the kingdom of God in which we share through Christ, that perfect new creation. By following Jesus we acknowledge that the new age of the kingdom of God has broken into the old age of this world – but we know that God's kingdom has not yet come to full fruition in this world. That's why we pray "your kingdom come on earth as in heaven". The kingdom of God is both 'now' and 'not yet'. And that combination of 'now' and 'not yet', those two simultaneous yet different realities, inevitably creates tension.

What's more, there's only one way of joining this unusual Christian life, of becoming part of the kingdom of God – you have to do it yourself. Membership of the Christian kingdom is

not inherited. It doesn't come from your relatives. It doesn't rely on genetics. It can only be gained by you, me, each one of us, entering into a personal relationship with God in Christ through the Spirit. And in our current situation, our simultaneous 'now' and 'not yet' of the kingdom of God, that also inevitably creates tension.

And that's what Jesus is saying here. Being a Christian in this world will, at times, be a tense and difficult affair. Because that time we all long for, that promised eternal reign of the God of peace and love in which all will be drawn fully into him, that's the 'not yet' of the kingdom. That is still to come. In that kingdom of heaven Christ truly is the Prince of Peace – but in the 'now' of this world, in our current tension between two realities, that's not yet possible. We may be called to love our enemies, but they are – for the time being – still our enemies. There is bound to be division, because some of those around us have not accepted Jesus' message, they are not Christians, and they are – to a greater or lesser extent – living in that old age, in the earthly broken reality of sin. In the passage we heard today, Jesus isn't giving us an instruction. He is *not* saying 'if you want to follow me you must turn against your family'. But he is being realistic about the cost of discipleship – 'if you want to follow me, you may well end up with some of your family turning

against you'. Your relatives don't get into the new kingdom of God just because you are in – and you don't get in just because your relatives are in. Christian discipleship, that strange life in the dual reality of the kingdom of God which is both 'now' and 'not yet', is costly, and you have to undertake it yourself.

Yourself, yet not alone. Because although the kingdom of God is not inherited by earthly blood ties, all its members are joined through Christ's blood as a new family. God's family. We here are joined one to another, brother and sister in Christ. And not just the people we can see. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, we are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses". We are brothers and sisters to all the thousands of faithful people who have worshipped in this place over many centuries. We are brothers and sisters to millions of faithful Christians across the world, and to the countless millions throughout times past and times to come. Not inherited by our own blood, but bound together in the blood of Christ. Though following him may bring division, not peace, in this life, the promise of the Christian family is peace and joy everlasting in the kingdom of God which is 'not yet' on this earth, but is already 'now' in heaven. The divisions of this earth are a sad reality, but they are not the final reality.

Difficult sayings of Jesus are just that – they are difficult. They challenge us – and they are meant to challenge us. And so I invite you to be challenged today. Have we tamed Jesus? Or are we ready to let his Spirit sweep through our church with its full force? And for each of us personally: are you truly living the Christian life? Are you committed to it, with its challenges and its difficulties? Are you ready for it to bring division? Will you live in the tension of the 'now', trusting in the glorious promises of the 'not yet'?

Today, Jesus invites you to "interpret the present time", and to commit your life to him, even with all that may cost. But do not be afraid; as you make that commitment, *you* are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses". However difficult it gets, you are not on your own. And the peace that is 'not yet' on this earth, is already waiting for us 'now' in heaven.