

The Swiss Church in London Sermon 2 July 2017

Jesus is often portrayed as the “good guy” who brought the message of peace, love and reconciliation to the world. The New Testament is perceived as the part of the Bible that is more easily accessible and presents ethical standards that we can agree with, whereas the Old Testament is the more violent and politically motivated book of the two parts. But even Jesus had his dark sides, and he said things that do not correspond with the image of the “good guy” we have. We are now going to hear a reading that gives us a different picture of Jesus.

Reading Matthew 32:34-42

“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn

*“a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’*

“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

My professor for dogmatics at the university of Berne was quite a character. I have probably mentioned her before. Her knowledge was so broad and her mind so sharp that all our brilliant thoughts would always seem banal. She was a professional violinist later turned professor of dogmatics, and a chain smoker who used to smoke during meetings in her office. It wasn’t always the most pleasant of experiences. There were also plenty of rumours about her not always being with it, for instance that she once forgot her suitcase on the platform and her assistant had to chase after her with it. Or that she would forget the key to her flat in Germany so she had to sleep on a student’s sofa in Berne. One rumour goes that her husband, also a brilliant professor of the Old Testament, and her, chose for their wedding reading this very verse from the Gospel of Matthew: “I did not come to bring you peace, but the sword.” I do not envy my vicar colleague who had to prepare the sermon, although I imagine it to be quite an interesting challenge.

Coming back to the reading that we have just heard, fractures and conflicts run through almost every family. Some of them are so deep that a reconciliation is not possible in this lifetime. If we dig a bit deeper into our family history, we will most likely find a black sheep somewhere, and perhaps this black sheep is us: siblings who haven’t been in touch with each other for decades, parents who have nothing to say to their children or vice versa. Even the Royal Family, so perfect and shiny in its appearance, has a long history of fractures. In more recent history, the abdication and exile of the heir to the throne, Queen Elizabeth’s uncle Edward, or the tragic marriage of Charles and Diana that ended in her early death. Keeping up appearances is something that families do, and it is often the only way to avoid conflicts that would tear us apart.

Jesus knew this. He knew that families are fragile and yet very powerful constellations that could hold us from breaking free. Many of the people who wanted to follow him hesitated because they struggled to break with traditions and expectations. We know it from ourselves. We keep a low profile and try not to contradict too much in order to keep everyone together. Some people pay a high price for this. It can affect people’s health and hinder us to live our dreams. The astonishing

thing is that it does not end as we grow older. I hear stories of hurt feelings and broken family relationships from people of literally every age group and many take it to the grave. I feel for families whose fractures become evident at the graveyard. To witness open animosities or feel the absence of certain relatives at a funeral day is hard, but it has its reasons and it is not for us to judge. Sometimes there are things in our lives that we fail to communicate because we do not find the words until it may be too late.

Jesus offered a whole new way of life that is less focused on one's own family but instead on humankind as a whole and our relationship with God. He expected from his disciples to break with their past in the most radical way if necessary. One disciple wanted to spend time at home to bury his father before following Jesus. But Jesus said: "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." These are not the words we want to hear from Jesus. They sound heartless and a notch too radical. At the same time, they can also be some sort of relief for people today who for one reason or another failed to attend their fathers or other relatives funeral and who never found reconciliation. Jesus says that there is another family that we belong to and another way to find reconciliation. Life is often far more complex than we want to acknowledge, especially with the people we most love, and in Jesus there is a place for this complexity.

Some of Jesus' words I can even find quite arrogant and self-absorbed. "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth", he says. "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. Anyone who loves their father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their daughter or son more than me is not worthy of me." These words challenge deep-rooted values that family should always come first. As Christians we are challenged to think again, and in the most painful way. Jesus laid out a clear set of guidelines of what it means to be a Christian, and always to be loyal and obedient to our families is not one of them, quite the opposite.

There are thousands of people out there, and some perhaps among us, who do not have a blood family, either because they have all passed away, or because the fractions are so deep that the contact became impossible. They literally had to walk away to get back on the right path. In Jesus there is a family for everyone. In Jesus there is an open door that leads us to freedom and self-worth. In Jesus there is reconciliation even when reconciliation fails in our earthly life. Jesus shows us the way to be at peace with ourselves. We have to be kind with our own wounded hearts to be able to understand the suffering of others. Jesus teaches us that we are loved even though we might not receive this love from the people we most desire it from. This is an entirely new dimension, not just for the disciples back then, but for us today. To walk away and to break with family traditions and restraints is sometimes necessary to heal. Only when we allow ourselves to heal do we become capable of helping others to heal. This is how the kingdom of God spreads. It does not start necessarily in our families. It happens where we meet strangers. It happens where we expect it least. Jesus says: "Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

How far would you go to build the church? What are you ready to leave behind to build a community of strangers that can become a place of healing for the many? When have you last left behind your family to follow your ideals?

The kingdom of God and the church of Jesus Christ is not a service centre although this is an attitude that many people have. Church only works if we build it together and make sacrifices. The kingdom of God can only grow if we do not ask 'what can the church do for me?' but rather 'what can I do for my church?'. Words that will probably remind you of a certain US President's inaugural address a few decades ago...

I would like to turn our attention now to some words in the Old Testament, and this is the Psalm of reconciliation. When we hear the word reconciliation, we often think of reconciliation between us and others. But really reconciliation starts within us. We first have to forgive ourselves to truly be able to forgive others and find forgiveness. The double commandment of love says: 'love God with all your heart and love your neighbour as you love yourself.' Love and forgiveness go hand in hand. We can give the double commandment a little twist and say: 'forgive your neighbour as you

forgive yourself.' We are unable to forgive others if we are not able to forgive ourselves: for the many times that we have messed up, the many times when we have run away. Forgiveness is not always possible in our families. But it is always possible in God.

So let me end this sermon with the words of reconciliation from the Old Testament, Psalm 32:

Psalm 32

*Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.
When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.[b]
Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord."
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.
Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.
You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.
I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.
Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.
Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!*

Amen