

29 June 2008

Readings:

Psalm 17 1-7, 16
Matt 10: 34-42

Rom 6: 3-11
Gen 32: 22-32

How many do you remember – indicator of age and generation you belong to.

OLDER THAN DIRT

Quiz:

How many do you remember?

Count all the ones that you remember not the ones you were told about. Ratings at the bottom.

1. A Sammy van
2. Drive ins
3. Sweetie cigarettes
4. Cool drink machines that dispensed glass bottles
5. Cafe's or milk bars with juke boxes
6. Home milk delivery in glass bottles with foil lids.
7. Party lines
8. Newsreels before the movie, the National Anthem after.
9. Packard cars
10. Blue flashbulbs
11. Telephone numbers with 2 letters and 4 numbers
12. Peashooters
13. Wash tub wringer
14. 78 RPM records
15. Metal ice trays with lever
16. Studebaker cars
17. Fish on Fridays
18. Using hand signals for cars without turn signals
19. Bread delivered
20. Head lights dimmer switches on the floor
21. Ignition switches on the dashboard
22. Heaters mounted on the inside of the wall
23. Real ice boxes
24. Pant leg clips for bicycles without chain guards
25. Soldering irons you heat on a gas burner
26. The board and bucket lorry.

If you remembered 0-5 = You're still young

If you remembered 6-10 = You are getting older

If you remembered 11-15 = Don't tell your age,

If you remembered 16-26 = You're older than dirt!

Not just a funny to start but relevant to gospel reading – want to focus on it.

Have been working way through Matt Ch 10, which records Jesus choosing 12 disciples then speaking to them to prepare them and sending them out on first mission. Been called Jesus' ordination sermon to disciples.

Words addressed to closest followers but relevant for us today too. Among 'hard sayings of Jesus' demands make as tough on hearers today as were then.

Today's reading begins with apparent contradiction –

"Do not think that I come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" v 34

Birth Jesus hailed by angels with cries of "peace on earth, good will among men" he was called "prince of peace" and he praised peacemakers. How then does he come to talk about bringing a sword, symbol of conflict?

Peace – sense of Hebrew word here to bring together what was broken, peace Christ brought was not just doctrine but a lived experience of peace with God, with self and others. Gospel his followers proclaimed after his death called 'gospel of peace'. Individuals groups previously divided were united in devotion to Christ e.g. Simon Zealot and Matt tax collector – opposite ends social scale.

Jesus not advocating conflict or violence but being realistic about **consequences** of his coming. Conflict not purpose of his coming, but **effect**.

FF Bruce suggests spoke from personal experience when identified conflict within a family. Indications in gospel story that members of his family not sympathetic to ministry – John 7: 5 'even his brothers did not believe in him'. Conflict Jesus speaks of is between those chose to follow him and those rejected him. If you like, choice between old order of synagogue and new order of church.

May be difficult for us to grasp kind of conflict could have been caused by choosing to follow Christ, contemporary e.gs.:

Orthodox Jews Hasidim – when young person leaves, elders tear clothes and mourn – as if that person is dead. Similar with Pennsylv. Dutch or Amish – defectors banished from comm.. as if dead.

Jesus identifies relationships between father and son, mother and daughter and mother-in-law and d-in-law because newly married couples lived with husband's parents conflict likely to be inter-generational younger gen choosing new faith charismatic carpenter leader, older generation opposing them. Where funny e-

mail I began with is relevant, because highlights some differences between generations. Female relationships identified also because Judaism is matrilineal – if mother is Jewish you are automatically, if father is but mother not, you are not automatically Jewish. Why so much emphasis on Non-jewish women converting when marry into Jewish family. Mothers pass faith, traditions and practices on to their children.

Suggest that in contemp society roles often reversed – grandparents faithful believers post-modern parents less likely to be regular worshippers. Said before great gift grandparents have to give to grand children – help them come to faith.

‘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’ v 37 ESV

In light of 5th commandment to honour parents, which was seen as highest social obligation in Jesus’ day, also sounds like something of a contradiction. What it points to is theme of this whole reading – need to make a radical priority commitment to Jesus and let nothing, literally NOTHING be ‘more than me’. That is why these are among ‘hard sayings’ of Jesus. He makes it clear that our commitment to him supersedes all other commitments.

Theme of need to choose and make supreme commitment of our life to God continues in image of cross.

‘Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.’ v38 ESV

First time cross mentioned in Matthew, listeners familiar with cross as mode punishment but not yet associated with Jesus. Cross a Phoenician mode of execution taken over by Romans perfected it into method involved several days of excruciating pain before death. Used it to discourage non-Romans from crime. A radical choice Jesus laid before these followers about to go out on their first missionary journey: if you want to be my followers, you must be willing to be publicly tortured and executed for following me.

With hindsight we are familiar with profound contradiction of our faith that this instrument of torture and death brought us redemption; became symbol of life. Not so disciples., Jesus’ audience.

Notice Jesus says ‘whoever does not pick up his cross’ – choice there. Just as he chose death to give us life, so are we to choose death, death to self – we are called to crucify self-interest in favour of Jesus. Not a choice to be made once and for all but over and over 70 x 7 every day in different contexts.

‘Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’ v 39

Another of those wonderful contradictions at the heart of our faith. This is the language of martyrdom. May not mean much to us in comfort of society that at least tolerates Christianity, but many of those original hearers would experience their truth. Not all were crucified but many if not most were persecuted and put to death. What does it mean for us? Matthew Arnold expanded version of the verse makes it starkly clear:

‘Whoever finds his life **by denying** me will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’ v 39

Another commentary notes: ‘We must love Jesus not only more than our families but more than our own lives...the moment we become Christ's followers, our own lives and wills become forfeit; we die with Christ to sin (that is, to the right to make selfish choices; Rom 6:3-4) and choose a path that could lead any day to our execution for Christ's name (Mt 16:24). Reading from Romans echoes this theme.

We speak glibly today of bearing "our cross" – having to put up with a troublesome relative or some physical ailment, but it is, or should be, more than that. For each of us, form or forms self-denial takes will be different.

Want to read you piece from another commentary: ‘We require pure eyes, and hearts kept in very close communion with Jesus, to ascertain what our particular cross is. He has them of many patterns, shapes, sizes, and materials. This Christ claims absolute supremacy in our hearts. He goes still farther, and claims the surrender, not only of our affections, but of self and life to Him. What a strange claim this is! A Jewish peasant, dead nineteen hundred years since, faces the whole human race, and asserts His right to their love, which is strange, and to their supreme love, which is stranger still. // Why should we love Him at all...?... And why should we love Him more than our dearest, from whom we have drawn, or to whom we have given, life? What explanation or justification does He give of this singular demand? // Absolutely none. /// He seems to think that its reasonableness needs no explanation. Surely, never did a teacher professing wisdom, modesty, and, still more, religion, put forward such a claim; and surely never besides did any succeed in persuading generations unborn to yield to His demand, when they heard it.

This strange, audacious claim is only reasonable, if we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who died for each of us, and that each man and woman to the last of the generations had a separate place in His divine human love when He died. It is appropriate to love Him, if this is true; it is not appropriate, unless it is. The requirement is as stringent as it is strange. This Jesus leads a strange royal procession – the King with a cross on His shoulder, and all His subjects behind Him with similar burdens! Through the ages that procession has marched, and it marches still. Self-denial for Christ’s sake is ‘the badge of all our tribe.’”

Conclusion

So where does all this leave us?

I want to suggest it leaves with some hard questions to reflect on in the light of these 'hard sayings':

1. How would we respond to Jesus asked us the question 'Is there anything or anyone you love 'more than me''?
2. What is our cross of self-denial, perhaps **crosses**?
3. Do we wear the 'badge of our tribe' openly and take our place willingly in the procession carrying our cross and following our king?
4. Are we finding our life but actually losing it, or losing it for Christ's sake and actually finding it?

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So as not to leave us in despair, I make last word a word of encouragement from commentator 'We can always make sure of strength to carry the cross which the Lord means us to carry, but not of strength to bear what is not ours.'