

Jesus' subversive message

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Jeremiah 20.7-13; Psalm 69.7-19; Romans 6.1-11; Matthew 10.29-39

Sometimes in life you meet someone who knocks you off centre. You are going along thinking you have certain important matters understood and put in neat boxes; you feel safe in this place of certainty and knowledge for the world makes sense and you know how to navigate your way. But then you come across a person who tips it all upside down. One such person in my life was Felipe, an Igorot man from Pedlisan, a village David and I stayed in while I was doing my research for my Master of Ministry back in 2006. Felipe is a rice farmer and a father of six grownup children. His whole life is about serving others. Not just in safe, comfortable ways. He puts his life on the line on a regular basis. One group of people he serves are the Agtas. These are forest-dwelling nomadic hunter-gatherers. In appearance they are small and very dark with curling black hair, very different to the majority of Filipino people. Their numbers are very small and dwindling due to their traditional lands being taken over by migrants from the highlands and deforestation. Felipe acts as an advocate for them. He argues in court. He negotiates between different groups and he lies down in front of illegal logging trucks when they come to tear apart an Agta's home. He does all this because he believes that is what being a follower of Jesus Christ requires of him. For his pains he is ridiculed, threatened and lives in fear. Yet he is full of faith, hope and love.

It is said that all Christians are persecuted but some more than others. Either they live in an unusually evil environment or they are unusually good Christians. Felipe is persecuted for both reasons. He lives in a place full of corruption and poverty and he is a seriously good man. When I think of Felipe I must admit I am seriously challenged, seriously knocked off balance. He makes my comfortable, safe Christian journey seem unreal.

And it is. In my luxurious safe existence it is easy to forget that Jesus message is seriously radical and is I think meant to be destabilising. It is countercultural in its essence. The Sermon on the Mount, and so much of Jesus' later teaching, like our Gospel reading today, revolves around his disciples, us, acting one way whilst the world acts in another.

For instance, we are to love all people, whereas the world loves only its friends; we are to pray meaningfully, whilst the world is full of empty phrases; we are to seek the things of God's Kingdom, whilst the world seeks only for material things. Human values are radically reversed in Christ. The humble are exalted and the proud debased; the first are put last, the servant made the greatest. And remember, Jesus also compares his followers not only with 'the world' but with the contemporary religious people of his day—the 'scribes and Pharisees'. The way of Jesus was radically different from that of both the religion and the world of his day.

Jesus message is *essentially* radical. It is subversive by its very nature. It presents a perennial challenge to the ordinary ways of the world—a standing rebuke to the status quo, always and everywhere. No society follows Christ's example perfectly. This means that no one gets a "pass": Jesus challenges every culture, even historic Christian culture. He certainly challenges our culture. Just think of what our culture is like right now. Just think of how the governments proposed budget will target the most vulnerable for what seems purely ideological reasons? Just think of what we as a society are doing to the earth on which we depend and for which we are responsible? I could give example after example but let me plant some words of Albert Camus, the French philosopher writing in the 20th century. He said, "I sometimes think of

what future historians will say of us. A single sentence will suffice for the modern man: he fornicated and read the papers.” He fornicated and read the papers.

It is just as well is it not that Jesus words are so challenging, so confronting, otherwise we would all be asleep and shut down to a different path, the way God loves and the world God so wants to redeem.

God has always been about loving the world into redemption. Our story today from the Jewish Testament is part of this plan, this purpose. Jeremiah, one of the most famous prophets of Israel, has again found himself in strife for proclaiming the message of God to the corrupt culture around him.

Throughout his prophetic ministry Jeremiah was attacked by his own brothers, beaten and put into the stocks by a priest and false prophet, imprisoned by the king, threatened with death, thrown into a cistern by Judah’s officials, and opposed by a just about everyone. Today we find him lamenting how he has been treated. He cries, “Lord, I am ridiculed and scorned all the time because I proclaim your message.”

And what a message he has proclaimed! Just prior to this lament he has spoken God’s message to a society that has torn down the ethical code that protected the powerless and built altars to Baal. These altars ran with the blood and smell of child sacrifice. The idols the wayward people of God were worshipping, were not some benign deities who wanted soft music and gentle prayers. They were false gods who demanded the slaughter of children. God says to Jeremiah about his people who have begun this abhorrent practice, “I never commanded them to do this; it never entered my mind.” In a striking message from God, Jeremiah smashes a pottery jar in front of his listeners and declares, “God will break this people and this city and it will be like this broken clay jar that cannot be put back together again.” The people are so corrupt, so violent, that their way of life can never be allowed to exist again. A countercultural message to the core and one that lands Jeremiah bound in chains and in prison.

I wonder, do we proclaim the radical message of God revealed through Christ Jesus enough to land us on the wrong side of the authorities? Do we put following Jesus before anything else: family, friends, security, good name, being liked? Jesus says in our Gospel, “Do not think that I have I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I came to set sons against fathers, daughters against mothers, daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law,” etc., etc.

What Jesus is doing is calling into question idolatry, particularly idolatry of the family, and warning that the gospel may divide rather than unite the home. In this showdown, the good news of the gospel sounds a bit like bad news, certainly bad news for the false peace that comes from maintaining the status quo.

For there is no encounter between the new order and the old that will not at some level be fraught with conflict, division, and pain. As usual, and rightly so, Jesus’ word makes us uncomfortable, just like the faithful, religious people long ago who were offended by so much of what he said and did.

So how do we make sense of this somewhat distressing passage about family loyalties? Barbara Brown Taylor calls it a, “burr from Matthew’s Gospel. One of those passages I wish he had never written down.” Yet she goes on to write, “I am a daughter, a wife, a sister, an aunt, and each of those identities has shaped my life, but none of them contains me. I am Barbara. I am Christian. I am a child of God. That is my true identity, and all the others grow out of it. You are God’s child first. That is no role. That is who you most truly are”.

But claiming that identity, and living faithfully into it, can have consequences in a world of empire and fear, in the first century and the twenty-first as well. As much as we all long for family, in whatever shape or form that takes, Taylor says that Jesus' demand remains the same. We are to love him above all other loves, and if that means losing those we love, we are not to fear, because buried in the demand is a promise: that what we lose for his sake we shall find again, returned to us more alive than ever before.

You know Christianity is not just counter-cultural; it is dangerous. We accept the idea that there were early Christian martyrs who gave up their lives literally for the gospel. But there were also those lesser-known Christians, the everyday, ordinary ones like most of us, who suffered loss of family, place, security, 'respectability', because they embraced a faith that challenged social structures, including even the stability of the family itself.

The message of Jesus Christ challenges *everything*. It challenges the way we see the world and how we categorize others and ourselves. It challenges our unforgiveness and apathy. It challenges our sinfulness—our willful pursuit of our selfish desires and our unconscious ignorance.

It challenges our delusion that working harder, striving more and rushing around like mad things brings us security happiness and peace. It challenges the assumption that works bring salvation of any type. It challenges the church to be countercultural in essence also. To be a place where cultural values are turned upside down. Martin Luther King Jr famously said, "Our only hope lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism."

Now do you feel daunted?

Don't be. Jesus tells us that he will stand and declare publicly before God that those who stand for him are with him. He promised that his Spirit would be with us in all our difficulties and challenges, particularly the ones that come to us when we stand for him and his gospel message. He stated that those who try to gain their own life will lose it; but those who lose their life for his sake, for the sake of loving as he loved and proclaiming his Kingdom, would gain their life. It is these assurances that give Felipe his courage and hope and that ought to give us the same degree of comfort and encouragement.

May God's Kingdom come. May God's will be done on earth as in heaven. Amen.