

Sermon 25 June 2017 (Matthew 10.24-39) by Father Gordon

Part of what St Anne's is about – our selling point if you like – is that we are very much part of this local community that lies between the River Wandle on one side and Wandsworth Common on the other. Anyone coming in can look around and recognise something of the locality both in what is distinctive about our area and in its diversity. We can feel “at home”. This is church at its most domestic, really! And that is typical of Church of England churches up and down the country: they are part and parcel of their local communities.

But here we have Jesus saying to us: ‘I have come to bring, not peace, but a sword – to divide people one from another. And whoever loves even their closest relatives: their parents, their own children, more than me is not worthy of me.’ Is not the Church meant to be engaging in peace? Is not the Church meant to support families? How can we allow such talk when we are all meant to be signed up to tolerance and diversity? Should we erase such remarks from our Bibles?

But let us pause a moment and ask ourselves: should we put family first of all? If a family member commits a crime, are *you* meant to lie to cover it up? Would you agree to that? Or do not truth and honour and respect for the law come before family? Should you not say, ‘Yes, we are family, but I cannot lie to protect you from what you have done.’ Less dramatically, when family members fall out we may feel dragged into their rows, to take sides, but as a rule we struggle against that for we know full well that to do so would be a failure of love to both of them. It is clear enough: if we put family ahead of truth or ahead of love, we have failed. So of course we must put first of all Jesus Christ who is truth, who is love. That does not *exclude* family and friends; rather it shapes *how* we are to regard them.

A fine example came up the other day when someone was discussing faith schools in the newspaper. The writer declared that Christians had to “tolerate” and “respect” their secular neighbours. And a letter writer the next replied that Christians are not called to do that – they are called to *love* their neighbour. (*Times*, 21 and 22 June 2017) In other words, the worldly standards of toleration and respect are simply not good enough. They can so easily excuse us from truly engaging with others. And that is what Christians are called to do.

In Jesus' own day this kind of radical behaviour – mixing across social divides – led to people being at odds with members of their own family. That can happen very even today, especially when our calling to Christ results in a big change in our behaviour. But more often I would guess that the divide comes within ourselves; that the apparent peace which is mere comfort is disturbed by a realisation that our lives fall short of what they should be in God's eyes, when we could living lives which follow more closely in the path Jesus set out for us. Then one foe is not members of one's own household, but the different voices within our heads – vision and possibility on one side; comfort, anxiety, familiarity on the other. One thing I can promise you: if you do not feel that discomfort of “should I be doing more as a Christian”, then you have not even started on the path of Christ.

But this is not all doom and gloom. Let me finish with a more positive example, from all the dreadful news about the fire in Grenfell Tower. The nearby church of St Clement's is not one I know anything about, and I have not even looked it up on the church websites. But I can imagine that, like very many Anglican churches in run down areas, it is a small community, dwarfed by the numbers at the local mosque and ignored by most in its locality, an empty reminder of a bygone age. But when a crisis arose around it, that church community sprang into action and was one of the centres of care and hospitality when even local and national government agencies were floundering around. The people of St Clement's Church showed what being a Christian was about at that moment.

And that is happens when we put Christ first and look on our families and our neighbours through his eyes. Amen.