

## Lent 2016 (3) – True peacemaking (Luke 22:47-53, Isaiah 9:2-7)

What do you do to get what you want in this life? What is acceptable to achieve your purposes?

Know what right answer is: hard work and dedication, cultivating healthy relationships, spotting opportunities and having courage to make most of them – BUT know there's another side to our human natures, and most people will feel at least tempted to push boundaries to achieve what they want.

- Humorous e.g. – football changing rooms Wimbledon FC 'Crazy Gang' – toilet always flooded and no toilet roll in toilets. Others played annoying music at full blast or left windows open in winter.
- More sinister – story of Lance Armstrong – needed performance enhancing drugs to get a competitive advantage, then bullied and silenced all who knew truth.
- Sometimes little things can get out of control, and one small lie to benefit yourself escalates dramatically – favourite Christmas film Nativity – teacher Mr Maddens (angry at rival gloating over his school's success) pretends that Hollywood coming to film their nativity play – spirals out of control.
- Most of the time, issue is about source of power or control. We humans don't like to feel our destiny is in hands of others, so some of the things we do are about retaining the control to be able to do what we want, or to coerce others doing so.

These questions particularly important when it comes to matters of belief. The things we hold dear inevitably matter more. Even the mildest mannered person might do extremely bold things for someone or something they love. What we believe matters to us, we long for the outcomes of our belief to work out in reality. If we hold to a particular faith worldview, we might long to see that faith reach the whole world, for others to believe what we do, or to experience the benefits of following our particular path.

But what is acceptable to achieve that? What are we allowed to do? What if others don't share it? What if, in fact, they actively oppose it? What if we feel God's glory is at stake and not just our reputation? Is it ever OK to do something wrong to achieve the right outcome?

These are difficult questions, aren't they? And extremely pertinent as we look at today's world and see many people doing extremely wicked things apparently for the sake of what they believe. But they go to the heart of our bible passage today. Here we see 2 people under extreme pressure – a radical disciple who wrestles with deep disillusion and how to stop someone he now believes to be wrong, maybe even dangerously wrong; and Jesus himself, faced with the apparent failure of his movement for spiritual renewal. How does each respond? What can we learn today?

Brief recap – series – True Grit – words of Jesus from the story of Easter – true love and obedience. Here we get to next part of story, and it's a gripping story – Jesus is in the garden at dawn, he's spent the night in agonised prayer whilst one of his disciples has gone off into the night, frustrated and disillusioned that Jesus is not the Messiah he wanted, i.e. a political and military leader who would stir up the latent Jewish army and run the Romans out of town. What will happen next?

Famous story – why even today we use the name Judas to describe someone who betrays another. You'll hear it on the terraces at football grounds, or benches of house of commons when a politician defects to the opposition party. And here's the original Judas, betraying the Son of God with a kiss. Picking the one moment when Jesus was relatively alone, when he could be arrested without a riot. The ultimate inside job.

Story more complex than first appears. Judas had a cause too. **Not just a venal scoundrel, he was one of Jesus' inner circle of 12, he had gone out on missions, lived with Jesus for 3 years – basically he'd given up everything to follow the Jewish Messiah, the one who would renew his people. And he'd got to Jerusalem expecting the trumpet call to rebellion and discovered Jesus instead purifying the temple and talking about his death.** He was disillusioned, but he had what he saw as a noble cause: the restoration of Israel, the renewal of his people, the return of the land. What was he to do now? Jesus was taking things in the wrong direction, as he saw it. How would he get what he wanted, if this Messiah wasn't the right one?

The path he took, of course, was the one of deceit and betrayal. Throw in some money as well – though famously he despised himself for accepting it – and here we see an object lesson that the ends do not justify the means. And we can look at Judas and say – yeah, we all know that, none of us want to be a Judas.

But what about the other disciples? Picture the scene. Judas has arrived with his armed henchmen. The disciples are sleepy, and have just been getting a lecture from Jesus about staying awake and keeping watch – and now their master is about to be arrested and led away. How will they defend him? What would you have done?

I imagine many of us would have done what some of the disciples did – fight fire with fire, so the old saying goes. And Peter wades in as usual (Luke doesn't give a name but John does) and begins to fight back, even going so far as drawing blood. If they could just scare them off or hold them at bay for a few minutes a larger crowd would arrive and Jesus would be alright. Maybe even the longed-for rebellion would start here and now? It would be like Joshua and Samson and King David and Judas Maccabeus all over again. Aux armes, les citoyens!

How does Jesus respond? 'No more of this!' And he heals the servant's ear. In the account of this story in Matthew's gospel he goes further – 'all who live by the sword will die by the sword.' Basically the end does not justify the means. You can't use violence to get what you want, not even for a just cause.

And we need to remember that it *was* a just cause. Jesus was an innocent man, falsely accused and ultimately wrongly convicted. *Surely* it would be right to do what needed to be done to rescue him? Apparently not. Two wrongs don't make a right. The ends do not justify the means.

And it's not simply pragmatism. As Jesus also says in Matthew, he could have called on 12 legions of angels to destroy his pursuers. He had the power and the means at his disposal. But God's solution turned things upside down. Victory came through what seemed like defeat.

Jesus used his powerlessness to let God bring the victory. His death brought our forgiveness, his life brought our freedom. (That's what we've baptised Austin into today – forgiveness and freedom, but not achieved at the point of a sword or the barrel of a gun but the sacrificial love of the Prince of peace.)

So what conclusions can we draw from today? What does it mean for us. 3 simple applications:

**(1) You can't use violence in the name of religion.** The Prince of Peace (to give Jesus the title used in Isaiah) cannot condone violence to achieve the spread of his kingdom. When we pray (as will in a few minutes): your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, that doesn't allow us to use any methods to achieve it.

That is an absolute – any belief system that uses violence to achieve its ends is false religion.

Simply isn't in the character of God. (It may surprise you to know) that was very much the view of the early church. For the first 300 years, the Christian faith was a pacifist belief system. They took Jesus' words about turning the other cheek literally. In fact, if you were a soldier who became a Christian you couldn't be baptised unless you left the army. They took this stuff seriously.

The conversion of the Emperor Constantine and adoption of Christianity as the state religion was a huge problem for the church. Suddenly the emperor's soldiers went into battle with a Christian symbol on their shields. How do you respond to that? Trying to answer that question has shaped church/state relations for the next 1,500 years.

Famous religious and social commentator GK Chesterton observed that when the church cosies up to the state it is usually good for the state and bad for the church. Power corrupts. The state gets what it wants: religious validation, but the church gets sullied. We start thinking in worldly ways, using political power (and sometimes worse) to achieve our purposes. We need to go back to this story and remember our founder. 'No more of this!' Not the way of God. That's why Jesus talks about salt and light – images of influence and attraction, not power and coercion. Lot more I could say about current world situations and presidential campaigns, but that's enough for today.

2<sup>nd</sup> application more personal – **(2) the ends don't justify the means.** Easy to point to church or other big institutions and moan about their failings, but what about us? Let's come back to where we started – what methods do we use to achieve what we want? I doubt many of us use violence (I sincerely hope none of us do!), but we could include any number of other forms of manipulation, maybe verbal coercion, whatever, to get what we want – even for noble causes. Jesus calls us to be people of peace, who use *his* ways to achieve *his* purposes.

Those who live by gossip will die by it. Those who live by back-stabbing will eventually be stabbed themselves. As you sow, so shall you reap. Or to put it in the modern way: what goes around comes around. But blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus says, for they will be called children of God. You can never bring true peace through violence. As he reminds his followers elsewhere, 'My kingdom,' he says, 'is not of this world.' It turns our human ways of thinking and living upside-down.

Which brings us 3<sup>rd</sup> point... (recap)

**(3) Give it to God.** If stopped there, it would just be a sermon about good morals. But hidden question here – if not to use human methods, what do we do instead? Especially important question in crisis situations – you may be facing a real dilemma, how should you respond? Option 1 is always tempting – fight fire with fire. Humanly speaking, it might work – but this passage tells us that God won't be in it. Go that route and you're on your own.

Answer is not simply passivity, but actively to give it to God. God is more *just* than we are. Also more powerful. He looks after his own. When we pray your kingdom come, that is a real prayer, with teeth – important not just to recite it on autopilot. What would it look like for the kingdom to come, for God's will to be done in my life right now, or in this situation? In Matthew's account of this story, Jesus says that this is only happening because God has a plan to work through it.

The way of peace is not for wimps – it's for the bravest, who are prepared to risk *not* using power and coercion to achieve their purposes. It's also for the most full of faith, who *have* to trust God instead to vindicate them, to fight on their behalf. Vengeance is God's, as it says elsewhere – but that means it isn't ours. It's amazing what God can do when we give Him free rein to bring about his will.

So two questions as I close: What methods do we use to 'succeed': at work, in our family, in our relationships with others? And can we trust God instead to bring about his purposes in our lives?

And may the Prince of peace work his kingdom of peace in our hearts.