



Rev Wilf Holt
Line in the Sand
Ordinary 12
Matthew 10:24-39
25 June 2023

Some years ago when, as a student at St Johns Theological college I enrolled in a CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) course. This consisted of 12 weeks where theological students in the role of chaplains based themselves in an institutional setting (such as) prisons, hospitals or social services. I was allocated a hospital – probably on account of me not liking them much. On my first day I was allocated a general and a geriatric ward up on the 10th floor. I wasn't overly chuffed with the geriatric ward thing – but now given my age I view things a little differently.

Anyway on to my first rounds and up to the 10th floor. I elected to take the stairs – sort of postponing the inevitable. Walked thru the ward doors and choosing a bed at random approached an elderly lady. Good morning mam – my name is Wilf and I'm an Anglican Student at St Johns Theological College etc – wondering if you would like to chat.

Silence. “Hmmm” she said. Silence.

“I've had nothing to do with the Anglican Church since the Bishop blessed the bombers”.

Failing to come up with any insightful response I just gave a quiet chuckle.

Ice broken we then had a wonderful conversation about the roll of the church, the tragedy of war – already members of her family had been killed – Dunkirk and North Africa and the real difficulties of reconciling the fact that people on both sides of the war spoke to the same God in times of dire need.

Her response to the bishops' blessings indicated that his actions were, as you might say, a spiritual bridge to far. In this context perhaps that's not an appropriate illustration – lets go with a line in the sand.

She could not accept that instruments of war could be blessed with all that a blessing entails. Blessing those departing for war, praying for the safety of loved ones – that was appropriate – but blessing weapons crossed that line in the sand.

Back to today's reading. I can only imagine what someone who reads it for the first time must think.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

What is going on here – this bringing a sword seems so out of character for Jesus. Didn't he command us to love our neighbours as ourselves, didn't he proclaim good news to the poor and teach care and compassion for others, didn't he talk about seeking peace and honouring our family. Is this the man who's been called the Prince of Peace? Well somethings going on so its probably best to set the scene for today's reading.

At the beginning of this chapter Jesus has gathered all the apostles and is about to send them out into the world to continue what he had already started.

He conducts what in military terms we might call an Orders Group (An O Group). He gives the 12 clear instructions of where to go and what to do. Heal the sick, cast out demons, cleanse the lepers and speak to all who would hear about Jesus and his radical message.

He instructs them on what not to take on their journeys – no coins, no second tunic, no sandals, bag or staff.

So far so good – all perfectly understandable.

But then things start to get ominous as Jesus continues. He warns them that he is sending them out as sheep in the midst of wolves – encourages them to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Warns them that they will be arrested and flogged and dragged before governors and kings – and when that happens they will need to explain that they are preparing the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God, and if they struggle to explain, then not to worry as god will provide them with the words.

Finally he warns them that doing this is going to cause great trouble, will probably alienate them from friends and family and is going to be dangerous and possibly fatal.

Now we come to the words we've heard today.

"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Here Jesus is very clearly drawing a line in the sand.

Jesus draws a line between acknowledging him before others and denying him before others. He is telling the apostles that Jesus comes first in the allegiance stakes – any and everyone else comes second. We can approach that line and stand by it but we can't place a foot either side of it – it's one thing or the other. We acknowledge Jesus or we don't. We behave as Jesus would have us behave – or we don't.

Doesn't sound too hard but remember how the apostles struggled with this. Peter denied knowing Jesus and not just once, and once Judas betrayed Jesus the remaining apostles ran away.

In acknowledging Jesus we are acknowledging that Jesus will guide us in how we live. Will guide us in what we say and don't say, in what we do and don't do, the policies we support and the ideas behind them. In short - where and with whom we make our stand today.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law

This is not about Jesus actively setting son against father or daughter against mother but as a consequence of believing in Jesus and others not believing, then alienation to those whom we love may well be a consequence. Jesus is telling the apostles, if you believe in me then you will believe in the mission that I am sending you on despite the consequences.

In the same way for us, if we believe in Jesus we must therefore believe in what he stood for and act accordingly.

That's a line in the sand.

Acting as Jesus would have us act can definitely cause trouble. Think of some of the most successful troublemakers -

Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King. Their actions in calling out injustice caused controversy and division – a division that some were to respond to with horrific violence..

There are, however, other lines in the sand. Jesus isn't the only one who draws them. Some we have drawn for ourselves and some have been drawn for us by others.

They're not hard to identify.

The line drawn on nuclear powered warships, on putting to rights our treaty obligations, on recognising and to a degree recompensing those who have suffered abuse by the state or people in power in our schools and institutions. There are lines drawn through poverty, violence, and inequality in education, and healthcare. At the heart of these issues can be found the injustice that denies us as a nation true peace.

When we acknowledge Jesus we must also acknowledge that where there is no justice, there is no peace. And – as we know too well today – justice is not always a vote winning option.

Drawing lines can be unbelievably difficult – I dare to imagine the apostles sitting and listening to Jesus – sitting spellbound not daring to move as they get a glimpse of what faces them in the future- the persecution that they might face – as most of them did.

Jesus did not call the apostles to provoke persecution or to seek martyrdom. Persecution follows naturally when evil is exposed —when power is challenged and when the status quo is undermined. When we challenge injustice, there is a good chance that we will face opposition. If we yearn for an elusive community peace – seek out injustice.

If you want to know where Jesus stands, what he stands for, and with whom he stands look for the places of brokenness and dis-ease; look for love, justice, compassion, peace; look for people who are hurting, marginalized, oppressed or devalued. That’s where we see Jesus drawing a line in the sand and taking a stand.

I think of the time of my childhood when many would have thought that the nation was at peace. Yet the reality was different. Peace on the surface of society yet beneath the surface there was for many anything but peace. Single parents usually mothers struggling without state support to keep their children, where embedded racism and sexism were the norm – in fact most of the isms were the norm and as we slowly moved to overturn those isms we began to actively draw lines in what was acceptable and what was not in our society.

So where to now - well when summer finally arrives go down to the beach – preferably a sandy one. Find a stick or if you can’t find one use your toe and draw a line in the sand. Fix that image in your mind and even though the tide will eventually erase the line you will have a moment to contemplate it. Turn away and stroll down the beach and take a little stocktake on a controversial matter facing the community or nation.

Racism, equity, poverty, access to life saving services – all these and, many more have lines carved through them.

Whilst strolling question yourself:

- Where do I stand?
- With whom do I stand?

Once you have arrived at a conclusion then and only then ask

- Where would Jesus stand?

Unlike the beach, these kind of lines don’t get washed away – they only disappear when true justice creates the peace that Jesus spoke of so often.

Amen.