

Facing Conflict

Sometimes I wish I could choose the Sunday readings instead of following a lectionary. This certainly would be one of those days! In the Letter to the Hebrews we heard about people being sawn in two, and in the Gospel Jesus wants to create conflict, not peace. But every time I'm tempted to stray from the lectionary I remember how much I have learned from those times I had to face a passage rather than ignore it. So let's see what we can make of today's readings.

The conflict Jesus describes in the Gospel was likely the real experience of early Christians. Some family members believed in him and others did not. Christian believers were accused of atheism, oddly enough, because they rejected the Roman gods. Apparently Romans could not conceive of having *one* God. As Christians began to act in other unsocial ways, like refusing to fight in Roman wars, they came under more intense persecution and family members turned against one another. We've seen secular versions of this in totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, where family members betrayed one another to the authorities. It also occurs in some Christian sects that shun those who leave. Jesus knew what would happen to his followers.

In Luke's description of the conflict, it's a generational one that goes both ways. Old and young are mutually antagonistic. Curiously, there's no indication *which* group follows Jesus. Generational conflict seems to be a timeless human trait. In the church it often shows up when older members dismiss the ideas and approaches of younger members, even though those now old were dismissed by their elders when *they* were young.

Generational conflict isn't the only point Jesus makes. He also attacks the lack of understanding, of discernment, using an everyday example – the weather. In the Middle East, as here, weather systems approach from the west and hot winds come from the south. In Israel south winds come off the desert, so they are both very hot and dry. Jesus points out that people are adept at interpreting those signs, yet they completely miss the signs of the times. Is that from lack of ability or an unwillingness to do so? Jesus thinks it's the latter, which is why he calls them hypocrites.

Personally, I think he's a little harsh. Discerning the "signs of the times" is notoriously hard, then and now. Most people interpret the times based on their political viewpoint. Usually if someone tells me where they get their news I can pretty much predict what they will believe. And those beliefs then influence their interpretation of Scripture. Opposite conclusions have been drawn by quoting the same parts of the Bible. So how *does* one read the signs of the times?

For one thing, neither the Bible nor the signs are a matter of one's personal interpretation. Truth is best discerned within a community of believers. That's why I find hope in signs like the recent Lambeth Conference, the once-a-decade meeting of bishops in the worldwide Anglican Communion that just concluded in England. The Episcopal Church is part of a body that stretches to 165 countries, including the Global South where Anglicanism is exploding. Bishops there have deep theological differences with bishops in the US and Europe. That threatened to derail the conference. However, by face-to-face dialogue in small, diverse groups and through the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the bishops were able to acknowledge their

sharp differences while continuing to work together on critical world issues such as violence, climate change, and care of refugees.

I also think that bishops are more aware than most of us of the cloud of witnesses that surround them. I remember a comment made by our retired Bishop Alan Scarfe, who said that he always sensed the presence of his eight predecessors whenever he came to Trinity Cathedral, because all of them had served here. I know that many of you sense those whom you remember being in the pews – and those people, too, remembered those who came before them. That's the cloud of witnesses here, those who, like the ones listed in the Letter to the Hebrews, kept the faith so that we could believe.

Suffering and conflict continue to be a part of our world and the church. To deny or avoid that *would* make us hypocrites. Instead Jesus calls us to see beyond conflict, to acknowledge our differences and then work together to make the world a better place. We are called to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Would I have seen that if I had skipped past today's readings? Perhaps. But the lesson would not have rooted as deeply. So I am grateful that the lectionary forces me to confront what is uncomfortable. Besides, maybe next week it won't be so hard!

[Pentecost 10: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56.]