

Division / Decision - 14th August 2022

On two occasions in my life I can remember being told by people I thought were friends of mine, 'You're no fun any more.'

One time was when I became a real - as opposed to 'Sunday' christian; the other time was when I gave up drinking.

So-called friends avoided me as though I had some kind of infectious disease - but at the same time they obviously thought I had also become deaf, as they must have thought I didn't hear their snide remarks and jeers; "Oh, he's joined the God Squad"; "Oh, he's got religion"; "Oh, he won't come to the pub any more."

I felt as though I were going around with a sign hung about my neck saying, 'TOXIC - AVOID - MENTAL HEALTH HAZARD.'

I think that possibly there may have been some truth in that at university. I have always been prone to jumping into things over my head, and then wondering if I could swim. I'm pretty sure I was a complete pain in the arse when I first became a so-called, 'born again' Christian, and those similar that I meet today make me cringe with embarrassment to think that I was so obnoxious once. I had ALL the answers, didn't I?

Actually, no. I didn't even have a tiny percentage of them - I didn't even know half

of the questions that needed to be asked - never mind what the answers might be.

God save me from ever meeting me again at that stage of my life - I think I'd probably black my own eye!

Stopping drinking was actually a serial event - like the smoker who says that stopping smoking is easy - 'I've done it a hundred times!' For me, I had several episodes of stopping drinking from time to time - usually because of a epic hangover that re-set the Richter scale, and it only lasted as long as it took to recover sufficiently not to gag on my toothbrush or wear sun glasses in a darkened room.

So reading our gospel from Luke this morning really didn't hold a lot of surprises for me. I kind of already had that T-shirt.

But decision time is often also division time - and I think that is what Jesus is trying to put across to his disciples. Forget your anodyne sloppy and sentimental Christmassy images of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild,' surrounded by fluffy lambs, lying in a comfy bed of straw while he collects some pretty amazing birthday presents, to a personal chorus of angels.

Jesus is saying, 'Let's get down to the nitty gritty of following me, guys - this is some really tough shit. And if you think what I am

asking you to do is hard, try doing what I have to do!

I'll borrow a couple of examples from another preacher:

Annie's family was not thrilled that she had given her life to Christ. Then, when she told them she was being baptized - yes, in front of a church packed with hundreds of people - they told Annie: "How can you do this? You are an embarrassment to our whole family."

Betty's father was even harsher when Betty told him she was now a Christian and wanted to follow Jesus with her whole life. "From this moment on," he said, "you are no longer my daughter."

Janice's mother listened while Janice explained what her life used to be like - the drink, the drugs, the sex - but now Jesus had changed her life, and she was a new person, living in a very different way. When she finished, Janice looked at her mom, hoping she'd be pleased. Coldly and slowly, Janice's mother said: "I wish you were like you used to be."

A few months ago, Sheila and I read a book by a Muslim called, 'Seeking Allah, finding Jesus.' It tells the story of how his life was totally changed when he realized that his whole Islamic upbringing had been absorbed like ink onto blotting paper - without question at any

stage. Once he started researching the origins and validity his Muslim faith, he found out how much of it was not founded on any sort of facts, and even complete untruths that had been handed down - again unquestioned - from parent to child.

When he went on to discover the wealth of supportive evidence for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, he found himself unable to deny it any longer. The result was a huge family rift, and expulsion from the Muslim community.

Decision - division.

It can be tough, very tough, to follow Jesus. I have often heard people pray very sweetly, "Lord, I want more of you and all that you have planned for me." I'm ninety per cent sure those who prayed those words were thinking of all the blessings which would come their way. Jesus never promised only blessings. The road he would walk would include deep hardship and suffering, and it may well be no easier for the person who follows him.

Life in AA can sometimes be hard too. There are days (I'd be lying if I said there weren't) when I would gladly sneak out for a bootle of gin or scotch or vodka - or whatever your poison is; but I tell myself that I only have to

talk to a friend in AA or just make it through to bedtime sober, and I've cracked another 24 hours. Those of you not afflicted with this disease should count your blessings.

Jesus said: "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (v. 49). In the Bible, the image of fire is used to mean division - like people separated from each other by a wall of fire. Or it can mean purification - like gold melted down by a very hot flame to remove impurities. But most often 'fire' refers to judgment, and that's what it means here. Earlier in this chapter Jesus has been describing the return of the master of a household. It's a day of reckoning,

with reward or punishment for servants according to their faithfulness and readiness for his coming. Now Jesus says: "I have come to bring fire on the earth..." He brings the day of judgment.

In the Greek which Luke wrote, he places 'fire' as the first word in the sentence. He was emphasizing the fire. And the word translated 'bring' in the New International Version is **ballō** which means 'throw' or 'cast'. It implies great force. It is the word from which we get 'ballistics'.

Nor was Jesus being gentle about judgment. 'Fire will be poured on the earth,' says Jesus. Judgment will rain down like fire. "And," he

adds, "how I wish it were already kindled!" 'I wish there was no need to wait longer,' he's saying. 'I wish it were happening now.'

Jesus is saying this because his whole ministry is set in the context of his eventual going up to Jerusalem to face betrayal, mock trial, and then the most intense pain that humans knew how to inflict at that time - both scourging and crucifixion. We talk of 'excruciating' pain as the worst that can be imagined; that word comes directly from the Latin - ex cruce - from the cross, as nothing worse could be imagined. No wonder Jesus wanted it to be over.

We often think that this 'judgement' is only going to come when the end times are upon us; who's to say that they aren't here right now?

I suggest to you that the judgement is now, today, here - your decision time is right now. You can choose God in Jesus, or go on searching until you die. Good luck with that.

We often think - if we think at all - as we say the eucharistic prayer (or listen to it) that the going to death on the cross was no big deal for Jesus. The reason behind this is that the compilers of our liturgy are not on the same planet as Jesus or the rest of us. They write stupid things concerning Jesus' acceptance of his impending crucifixion, like, '... a death he

willingly accepted...' or '...a death he freely accepted...'

Are these people mad? Those statements are absolute bullshit! Have they not read Jesus' pleading with his father in tears in the Garden of Gethsemane? "Father, if it be possible, take this cup from me." Luke's gospel tells us that sweat like blood rolled off him at the time.

And in what way, pray, was this 'freely accepted'? The cost was monstrous - it cost him everything - abandonment and betrayal by his friends, judgement from his Heavenly Father, scorn, ridicule, and ultimate rejection,

to take the misery and sin of the world on his shoulders through the very portal of death.

The ultimate division from that decision.

So what you have to decide is whether you have the guts - the cojones, le palle - to make your decision: to follow Jesus wherever he may lead you, or not. If you do, you may very well have to face division from people you once thought you knew well - because if following Jesus doesn't change you and your life, then it bloody well ought to, and you're doing something wrong or you're only pretending.

At the end of the day you will find that the pain and rejection may not be as great as you

thought; but even if it is, the friends you have now will be real friends - not just ones who want to see you the way you were, because that means they don't have to make a decision.

If you make the right decision, your life will change immediately - like walking into AA did for me - but deferring it will leave you one step closer to disaster.

Jesus is not like gambling on the roulette wheel - he is a given, complete, and vital answer.

Life with Jesus may be tough, but it's safe and secure at the end of the line - and when you reach the end of the line, wherever that may

be - step out in faith, and you will suddenly find he has been carrying you all along.