

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Written by the Rt Rev'd +Donald Kirk, Bishop of Riverina

When we look around today's world, what do we see? Perhaps the thing that is most prevalent is self-interest. You might ask how is that different to other times and you would be correct because in one sense people have always been self-interested. But in our lifetimes, something has been lost, and that loss has increased the self-interest we see in society. Covid has not helped either. Our experience of this virus has caused some to retreat from involvement for fear of catching it. The current financial state of things nationally with interest rates increasing at an alarming rate has not helped. While some are benefiting from these increases there are many who are struggling, and those who were already struggling and facing desperation. All these things push people to self-interest.

What has been lost is a strong sense of community and the interconnectedness of extended family. This is particularly felt in large cities but also experienced in the country as members of family move great distances to find work and lose that sense of connection to either family or community.

A first glance at today's gospel passage from Matthew would seem to not help this at all, but on closer reflection we can see that everything that Jesus is saying here reflects the importance of relationship and connectedness.

First and foremost, Jesus speaks of the relationship between himself and his disciples: *"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master."* [Matthew 10.24-25a] As a piece of logic this makes sense. On a deeper level we realize that Jesus is inviting us to be like him following his example in our living. To do that, our relationship with him must come first; come before all other relationships and most importantly before our own self-interest. *"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."* [Matthew 10.37-38]

Second, Jesus warns of the ways in which his disciples will be maligned. *"If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!"* [Matthew 10.25b] There are plenty of people in the world today using derogatory language about the Christian Church. Some of this can be understood in the light of past abuses perpetrated by a minority, yet this too can be a form of self-interest. Jesus tells us to stand firm and not be fearful of the future. The truth of God's love for all humanity that Jesus

proclaimed will be revealed. *“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.”* [Matthew 10.26] As a metaphor of this it is worth noting that in those creeks and streams where gold has been panned gold can still be found. Even after all the alluvial gold has been removed, given time more will appear because the natural vibrations of the ground cause the gold to slowly come to the surface and gold that was hidden is revealed. In the same way, the evil intent of the deceitful is revealed and the Godly intent of the faithful is revealed.

Third, Jesus challenges his disciples to acknowledge him. *“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.”* [Matthew 10.32-33] If we seek to be like Jesus and accept without fear the love of God he has revealed to us, then we should be willing to acknowledge our faith publicly. We do this by gathering with the community of believers in worship on Sundays. We do this by living the example of Jesus’ love and compassion. We do this by willingly identifying as Christian when asked. This can be a source of division which is why he says: *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* [Matthew 10.34] Jesus’ way is a way of peace and perfect peace can only be found eternally. In this world there will always be those who reject him and his message, and that is the division (the sword) that he speaks of.

God loves us. God loves all people. God desires us to find relationship with him and through that peace with one another. May we put aside self-interest, build relationship with God by following the way of Jesus, fearlessly show love to God and to one another, and willingly identify as Christian. Only then can we hope for peace in this world and find peace in eternity!

