

23 Sunday (C)

4 September 2016

If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple. What on earth does that mean? How can Jesus tell us to hate people? Surely to hate our own parents, to hate my wife, my children, my brothers and sisters is not just wrong, it is fundamentally evil. It strikes at everybody we hold dear. Isn't this a kind of fanaticism, sectarian fundamentalism, with tone even of holy *jihad* or *fatwah*?

Jesus goes on to describe the spiritual life in terms of *a king marching to war* calculating how many troops he needs 'to stand up to the others who advanced against him'. And in the psalm God Himself sweeps *men away like a dream...Lord, relent! Is your anger for ever?* Whatever happened to the God of love and to Jesus all meek and mild?

And in our second reading, Paul is condoning slavery. Philemon is a slave owner and Onesimus is his slave temporarily on loan to the apostle.

Violence does permeate Holy Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New; it is there in the message of Jesus. And how easy it is to use those words to justify our own evil actions. It's there in our history. Trying to decide whether a particular violent action is permissible according to the Just War theory is fraught with difficulties.

We prayed in the Collect that we might *receive true freedom* – not just political freedom but real freedom, the freedom to be God's *beloved sons and daughters*; the freedom to be ourselves in our innermost being, the freedom to enjoy God, the freedom to love and to be loved, the freedom to *discover what is in the heavens*.

The resounding and recurring message of Holy Scripture is that this freedom does not come easily or cheaply. It requires a certain violence. It is something we have to fight for.

For most of us holiness does not come naturally. Our reasoning is unsure and our intentions unstable. It is difficult enough trying to understand our immediate environment and trying to live in harmony with our immediate neighbour, but to understand the ways of God, to try to **travel** the ways of God, that is something that is totally beyond us, something that is almost alien to us. So much easier to settle for the humdrum and the everyday.

Hence the need for holy violence, holy hatred, even, a fundamental change of direction, a rupture with the past, a new departure. But what this must never be is a hatred of other people, or indeed of our own souls and bodies. What we need to hate with a passion is our own possessiveness. *None of you can be my disciples unless he gives up all his possessions.* We love our parents, our husbands, our wives, our children, our brothers and sisters, but we never possess them, we never control them or try to turn them into carbon copies of ourselves. That is what we need to hate. It is upon that possessiveness that we need to declare a holy war.

The ultimate holy violence is the Cross. In dying with Christ each day, we put to death our possessiveness, our assertiveness, our desire for power and control. It costs us everything, just as it cost God everything. And it is always a struggle.

If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple.

Fr Michael