

The Lion and Four Bulls – August 15th, 2010

⁴⁹⁻⁵³"I've come to start a fire on this earth—how I wish it were blazing right now! I've come to change everything, turn everything rightside up—how I long for it to be finished! Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I've come to disrupt and confront! From now on, when you find five in a house, it will be—

Three against two,
and two against three;
Father against son,
and son against father;
Mother against daughter,
and daughter against mother;
Mother-in-law against bride,
and bride against mother-in-law."

⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶Then he turned to the crowd: "When you see clouds coming in from the west, you say, 'Storm's coming'—and you're right. And when the wind comes out of the south, you say, 'This'll be a hot one'—and you're right. Frauds! You know how to tell a change in the weather, so don't tell me you can't tell a change in the season, the God-season we're in right now.

⁵⁷⁻⁵⁹"You don't have to be a genius to understand these things. Just use your common sense, the kind you'd use if, while being taken to court, you decided to settle up with your accuser on the way, knowing that if the case went to the judge you'd probably go to jail and pay every last penny of the fine. That's the kind of decision I'm asking you to make."

Wow! Is this message ever a harsh one – or at least it seems oh so difficult. Brother against brother, Father against Son, Mother against Daughter. Divisions...and divisions are so painful, so very painful – and if you are like me, most wish to avoid them in life.

We have seen this passage lived out in real life – where divisions have rent a house asunder.

Back in the 1980's – The Progressive Conservative Party and their fight against the fellow conservatives of the Reform Party then the Alliance, is one example of division.

We saw this in the '90's with the countries of the former Yugoslavia imploding – being willing to fight, to kill, to alienate all over ethnic principles.

The United States witnessed it in a huge way during the War Between the States or the Civil War. Millions died as brother rose against brother over issues not everyone fully understood.

In our own Anglican Church there were some who left, including our former Bishop, on issues surrounding the sexuality debate.

Divisions – brother against brother, sister against sister, parent against child – divisions have existed for such a long time. And sometimes these divisions have led to a grievous end. Just ask about Cain and Abel.

But what was Jesus saying? Why did He feel it was necessary to remind us of the cost of being a disciple – and how this cost may be seen in divisions.

The ancient philosopher, Aesop, understood this notion. In his own parable, entitled, the Four Bulls and the Lion he told the story of how the lion saw day after day these four bulls grazing in the field – and of course he wanted to eat them. But as long as they were together, he knew that he could never attack, for together they were stronger than he was.

He devised a plan – a simple plan. He whispered in their ears of how the other bulls were talking about them – soon the bulls became cold and indifferent towards each other, suspecting each other of malice. This quickly led to the four of them parting ways – so that they each grazed alone.

And it was while they were away from each other that the lion was able to kill and eat each of them.

The moral: United they stood, divided, they fell.

So why would our Lord speak so openly about impending divisions? Is he trying to scare us? Is he preparing us for what may lay ahead?

I believe he is preparing us – causing us to think, to reflect, on the cost of the calling we follow – for there is a cost. The moment we place Jesus as just a nice man with a nice message, and not realize that he is challenging us to change, is the moment we have missed the impact of his message to us.

The other day I was listening to an interview of an author – she declared herself spiritual – a believer in Christ, and others, but no longer a follower of Christians. I listened with sadness to her explanations, of her reasons – many that were rooted in her distrust of the institution of the church. I listened to her explain

how she prayed, how she read scripture and other sources – and that she considered herself a spiritual being.

My sadness was not so much over her decision, but the pride of her decision that seemed to echo over the radio waves. The reporter, seemingly entranced by her decision, did not challenge her as I wanted him to. It was if he too were entranced, perhaps her thoughts mirrored his own journey – and in that journey brother was being turned against brother, sister against sister....

A thought that persisted in my own mind as I listened, for I have heard her thoughts from others I have known before. A thought that persisted was 'who will challenge you in your thoughts – who will you find yourself arguing against as you discern God's will and direction?' For I do believe that all of us, no matter how disciplined we may think ourselves to be, all of us need to be challenged, to hear scripture read, and to join with others as they too journey in faith. In her assertions, she had missed one important fact, that the voice of the church is not just the voice speaking from the pulpit, rather the voice of the church is the voice of each of us as we, together discern God's will.

The dissention, the division begins when one of us becomes so enamoured with their own voice that they cease to listen to the other voices. We forget one of the key passages of scripture, of how we, as the body of Christ, work together to achieve what our Lord has directed us to do – not as an individual but as a body. We all have a function in discerning God's voice – it is not my voice you need to hear alone, for I am not infallible, rather it is our voices so that we discern a common voice – a common direction – then the spirit has spoken.

If you think about the divisions mentioned, few if any were truly over ideological issues – most became divisions over a lack of desire to discuss, discern, and listen to dissenting voices.

Within the church, the body of Christ, we too grapple with huge issues that in one way or another affect all of us.

Yes divisions will come – but they will only come when we stop listening and talking to each other – when we stop searching for the face of Christ in the person doing the talking. Divisions will happen when we become intransigent. Divisions will happen as followers of Christ fall away. Remember the parable of the sower – of how some seed fell on rocky ground, sprouted roots but they did not sink into the ground or others who fell on the path and the birds took them away – this is so true now.

Christ went on to say, almost as if chiding his listeners, that the evidence is all around them - if they but look.

The evidence, the warnings – how do we personalize this message so that we realize it is meant for us? I offer a simple illustration.

I would often hear these words when my children were young, “Treasure your children now, for you will be surprised at how quickly they grow up.”

I would hear this warning, this advice, almost daily from parishioners, family members, all well meaning people who, as they spoke, were also reflecting on their own families having grown up too soon.

I would hear the words, but in the midst of the diapers, the fevers or running noses. In the midst of the temper tantrums, spurts of independence, and tiredness – the words would sail on by as if they were meant for someone else – but they weren't – they were meant for me.

It is only when I put the warning in the personal – in a way that was applicable to my life that I could see the simplicity of Jesus' message. And his message is meant to be simple. But, like others, sometimes I get too busy doing church duty, doing tasks in life, working, looking after personal needs, or reliving past glories that we stop looking for the signs that this reading applies to us.

.....Oh Lord, do let us fall into this trap!.....

The temptation will always be that we do not need God – that we are self sufficient – this is idolatry.

The temptation will always be that we know more than someone else, and that they are wrong – wrong because we do not like the challenge or the perspective they offer – this is envy.

The temptation will always be that we do not need each other – that we are better off alone – this is deception.

So what do we do? How do we remain faithful to our Lord? It is simply by noticing the signs around us – warnings - warnings that we are becoming too intolerant – and that we personally need to practice some tolerance. The signs of division are signs of disrespect – and again our task is to make sure that we are not the ones silencing another's voice, that we are not the ones punishing another for having a view different from our own.

What do we do? We see the signs and we pray that we will not fall – 'lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.'

Remember the story of the four bulls – how united they stood but divided they each were conquered – this wisdom is timeless.

It is only by realizing that the times we live in are one of extreme temptation, only then will we be prepared – prepared to listen for our Lord's voice, prepared to follow His leading, prepared to push away the temptations that can and do surround us – and to remain an active part of the body of Christ.

Amen.