

## Strange Times

We live in strange times.

Right wing extremists have become our own locally grown terrorists.

Night clubs and the neighborhood Walmart are the latest killing fields.

We see brands of Christianity that have precious little to do with the Gospels, with Netflix launching a series last week about a hidden group of ultra powerful evangelicals in Washington called The Family.

They believe they are the chosen inner circle of Christ.

They say that if God loves you, you'll be powerful.

That Christ came to benefit not the sheep, but the wolves.

We see it as new immigration policies are announced, designed to welcome the affluent and keep out the poor.

The debate last week being whether the famous poem on the Statue of Liberty, "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," should be changed to "give me your tired and your poor who can stand on their own two feet, and who will not become a public charge."

Yes indeed, we live in strange times.

And into these times comes Jesus.

He is not meek and mild but is instead calling down fire, insisting that what follows in his wake is not unity, but division.

Not because of Jesus, but because of us.

We know that Jesus is the prince of peace.

That's what the angels announce to those grubby shepherds so long ago on that hillside in Israel.

It's what Isaiah sees many years earlier as he dreams of the one who will not break the bruised reed, or quench the smoldering wick.

Yes, the promise of Jesus is the promise of peace, it's just that we have such a hard time accepting that promise.

When our nation was viciously attacked on 9/11, our collective response was revenge and retaliation.

And here we are, nearly 20 years later, with the Middle East a basket case of war and devastation.

Trillions of dollars spent.

Hundreds of thousands of lives lost, millions displaced as refugees.

Why?

Because we refused to embrace what Jesus says: love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you, put away your sword.

These days it's our neighbors to the south who are demonized, locked up, thrown out, even though so many of the problems they are fleeing are a direct result of our own government's decades long support of dictators and giant agribusiness in that region.

Jesus says, "when you welcome the stranger, the naked, the hungry, you welcome me; and when you reject them, you reject not only me, but the very one who sent me."

"My ways are not your ways," says the Lord, and the division that follows Jesus is the division caused when we insist on our own best thinking, when we rely on our love affair with so-called "common sense" as we seek to protect ourselves and our stuff, in short, when we read the gospel with the eyes of the status quo, rather than challenging the status quo with gospel eyes.

The division Jesus announces is there when the prodigal son returns home.

There's big brother, who's always behaved, with steam coming out of his ears because he can only resent dad's loving forgiveness of junior.

It's the division that sends the rich young man away, staring at his boots, the only person in all the gospels who explicitly says no to the explicit invitation of Jesus to follow.

An invitation he rejects not because he owns so much stuff — but because his stuff owns him.

It's the division that propels Judas to that secret meeting with the religious big shots in the dark of night when the idea of a suffering

messiah is too crazy to imagine, as he sells Jesus out for a few coins, with a kiss.

It's the division that occurs when we take the faith that calls us to change the world and make it simply a private affair, just you and me Jesus, turning a blind eye to the refugee, the immigrant, the poor.

The division Jesus places before us this morning is the division that finds him nailed to the cross, because we find it so hard to accept God's way of doing things, a way rooted in mercy, kindness, and humility.

Those who promote a "me first" faith or the rampant nationalism that is pervading the world, miss this hard fact.

Jesus never tries to cuddle up with the powers that be.

Jesus always and everywhere is found among the least, the lost and the left behind.

Our original sin seems to be our undying efforts to create God in our image, rather than bending ourselves to be more like beings created in the image of God.

And this is particularly true when it comes to what I own.

Jesus says that God owns everything, and whatever bounty I may find on my plate is pure gift, only a loan, and I am to be generous, just as God is generous with me.

And very truthfully, I struggle with this every day, even as he reminds me that "the measure with which you measure will be measured back to you." Lk. 6:38.

You can see why serious divisions pop up everywhere, not only between people and nations, but within our own selves!

Today's gospel is a call to all of us to come home again, to return to the faith that Jesus teaches.

A faith that isn't so much about right and wrong or protecting my interests, but a faith that is rooted in dying and rising, here, today.

It is an invitation to a pattern of life that is far more terrifying, yet far more exhilarating, than policing the behavior of others could ever be.

Today's difficult and challenging and quite frankly, fearsome gospel is a reminder that the church, you and I, and every baptized person, and every person of good will, no matter their faith, or lack thereof, is the Body of the Cosmic Christ on earth.

We gather every Sunday not as a social club or to meet some vague obligation to God, but precisely because we are Christ's Body.

When we gather here, heaven and earth hold hands, the sacred and the profane embrace, so that when we leave this place we can witness in our lives to the magnificent mystery that in giving up, we receive, in letting go, we find, in dying, we rise again.

To do that is to follow the path of our true calling.

To faithfully follow our mothers and fathers who came before us: those who "through faith conquered kingdoms, and shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword [while] others were

tortured or flogged, chained and imprisoned, stoned to death, sawn in two, destitute, persecuted, tormented." Heb 11:29f

Perhaps now more than ever, the world is dying for the faith that gives life.

So let us join with our Lord as we embrace our baptism.

A baptism that calls us to die to our best thinking, and to rise in the foolishness of the cross.

A baptism that purifies, allowing us to wake each day seeking the costly grace to serve the needy, to forgive ourselves and others, to hope for the day when God will indeed make all things new.

Never forget, "Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth ... but yours ..." St Theresa of Avila.

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