

10th Sunday After Pentecost  
August 14, 2022  
The Rev. Rod Sprange

May the Holy Spirit inspire, guide and sustain us through the words of the Gospel, Amen

It seems every night when I watch a news broadcast, for at least one of the items the news reader gives a warning "some of the content in this item may be disturbing for some viewers, viewer discretion is advised". I am offering you a warning this morning, some of the content of this sermon may be disturbing to some members of the congregation?

Here we are in the middle of summer. I hope you have been able to take time to relax and just enjoy being. When I am sitting reading in the warm sunshine with the calls of the birds, and gentle breezes, I'm sometimes lulled into a pleasant feeling of sleepy contentment. Then, suddenly, the neighbours car alarm goes off, and I am fully awake with my heart pounding. All my senses alert.

I get the feeling that Jesus intended something like this in today's reading from Luke. Perhaps his followers were just not recognizing the terrible crisis that was coming, and Jesus needed to shake them awake. Perhaps also, the stress he was under, knowing where his mission was inevitably leading, led him to wanting to shake them awake. Perhaps we too need to be shaken awake, shaken out of our satisfaction or complacency about who we are, as individual disciples and as the church.

We live in a part of the world where it's pretty easy to be a Christian. There is not much danger in us going to church. Please do pray for the Coptic church in Giza, devastated by fire earlier today. Probably the worst that will happen to us is that others may think we are a bit weird or naive. Let's face, most of us don't take many risks for our faith. Jesus said he came to bring fire to the earth. I understand him to mean a cleansing, purifying fire, to bring people to real repentance. He wanted his followers to join him in being the flames that would ignite the fire. He wanted their hearts to be on fire. As a church are we alight - are we burning with passion?

When this church building was started back in the middle of the last century, the congregation had a dream, a concrete vision they were all committed, they were building and becoming a neighbourhood church - they would fill the building with existing and new Anglican families. They would be a centre of Christian ministry in the neighbourhood. It was an exciting time. The parish was growing.

That dream was achieved in the 2nd half of the last century. What is our dream today? Where are our passions for mission - and I don't just mean outreach - but Christ's mission? Have you noticed that you no longer have the word mission in any of your ministry groups or committees. The centre of mission is loudly proclaiming the Gospel, the Good News, to a world in desperate need of hope and direction.

Jesus told his followers about the stress he was under to complete his mission. He referred to his coming confrontation, arrest, torture and brutal execution as his baptism. Perhaps these words of his relating his crucifixion to baptism should make us think a little more deeply about our own baptisms and promises. There is a joy in witnessing a baptism. It is one of the greatest privileges of a priest, to preside over a baptism. Perhaps we should also be conscious of the awesome responsibility that the candidates take on, as they and we make the baptismal promises. Jesus said that if any want to follow him they must take up their own cross.

We like to think about unity and peace - but in this passage Jesus says instead of unity and peace he brings division. Division even within families. It seems to me, at least in the western world, we try to avoid religious controversy in our families and church, unless its about sex. We don't want to make others feel uncomfortable. We don't want to provoke an argument. The reality in Luke's time was that families were very much divided. Jewish families were divided because some had believed in Jesus, while others saw it as blasphemy. Local Jewish communities had split over Jesus. The new believers were expelled from synagogues, many were persecuted.

I am not suggesting that you go home and create a fight. But as the church, as disciples, why are we not more vociferous about climate change, social inequities, racism, and all forms of injustice? We should do this, not

because we have a social conscience, but because as disciples we know that every other person is holy and loved by God.

Why are we not holding up the teaching of Christ as the answer to so many of today's problems? Have we become too comfortable? Do we have conviction about what we say we believe? These are very real challenges for us as the church.

Jesus talked about the coming crisis. I think there were layers to this. There was the coming crisis he and his followers were to face in Jerusalem. But it was also a crisis for Israel - Jesus was the Messiah, and had been sent, as God had promised, to save Israel and through Israel, the whole world. Yet those with the power were leading the people to reject Jesus. They were against him because his teaching would upset the status quo, remove much of their privilege and power. This should have been the culmination of Israel's calling, but they didn't get it. At the same time the Zealots were doing their best to incite an insurrection to drive out the Romans. Jesus knew this was a foolhardy path and could only lead to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Judas Iscariot was a Zealot. Some believe that the reason he betrayed Jesus was because he was frustrated that Jesus, as Messiah, hadn't started an armed insurrection. He hoped his betrayal and the attempt to arrest him would force Jesus to lead the insurrection. That was not Jesus's mission. There was the coming crisis that Jesus saw, that the insurrectionists would eventually bring down the whole might of the Roman army on Israel. This happened and resulted in the destruction of the temple, and the end of temple worship.

We need to pay attention, to keep awake, because the Gospel doesn't just speak to the past, it speaks to the present and the future. What are the signs? What crisis are we facing?

These days, we seem to have no lack of crisis. Climate change is probably the greatest existential crisis the world faces. The church must be active in the urgent fight to save the planet.

I think we can all see the signs of crisis in the main-line churches. Declining, aging congregations and the resultant decline in income. And energy for mission and ministry. It's easy to frame this as a financial crisis, but that is just a symptom. Yes, it's true that many parishes are facing the reality that they will not be financially viable within a few years unless something changes. But even if some innovative ways of financing the church are found, I think it will just prolong the inevitable continued decline, unless the church undergoes fundamental change.

Our Bishop, Geoff and the Lutheran Bishop, Jason, in a joint letter, recently wrote, *"Disciples committed to life-long learning are the building blocks of vital congregations"*. I believe this is an area where change is crucial for many parishes. Rowan Williams in his insightful book "Being Disciples", warns us that if we come to a time when we think we have learned enough, we have rather missed the point. Disciples are life-long students.

I believe the crisis facing the church, as we know it, and our challenge is a combination of lack of faith, no commitment to growing as disciples (through education, prayer and action), and failing to be ready to share the Gospel when we engage with another or the community.

Jesus had expectations of his followers. The early church had expectations of disciples. ***Today's church makes no or few demands on anyone.***

We need to expect more of one another; to expect real commitment to discipleship that goes far beyond regular attendance at worship. We must be open and welcoming to all, but unless there are expectations of membership we will undervalue what it means to be church; to be part of a Christian faith community. I'll give you an example of a reasonable expectation from an Anglican church in Winnipeg. They have a large, multigenerational congregation each week. They have very active young people. And, they have expectations of their members. The year I was a student there, during Lent they had 7 different lenten studies on offer. It was emphasized that every member of the church was expected to sign up for and attend at least one of the lenten programs. The programs weren't offered with a "hope you will find something of interest and sign up". They offered a variety of options, but "We expect that you will participate in at

least one of these programs". I would love to see congregations making covenant together, laying out our expectations of one another. Giving permission to one another to have expectations of us, and to remind us of those expectations. And, more importantly supporting one another in meeting those expectations and living out our lives as disciples of Christ.

It is mid-summer, are you still feeling relaxed? I hope this wasn't the sermon you were anticipating. I hope that some of you may continue to think about the lessons of today's Gospel and the realities facing our world and our beloved church. I hope some may really take the time to think about what repentance would look like for St. Peter's. I wonder, will our congregations make a fundamental shift? I don't know. If they don't I think the church, *as we know it*, will soon disappear. The good news is, the church will not die, it will be reborn. But it may be reborn without many of us. How much better for us, if we heed the signs, and together discern the path to renewal, and covenant to walk that journey together.

Let us pray for this parish, the Anglican Church, and for all disciples of Christ that we be open and courageous in following where God is leading us and living up to the expectations of Jesus Christ,

Amen