



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 15 August 2004
Title: **"Hard Sayings."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Jeremiah 23:23-29
Second Reading Colossians 3:1-11
Gospel Luke 12:49-56

In times past, today's readings would have been the subject of what we used to call a "fire and brimstone" sermon in which sinners were told to live in fear of an angry God. Admittedly, an angry God seemed to make more sense in a time of plague and famine and early death. An angry God seems more satisfying to some people even today when things seem grim or unfair. 'This must be God's vengeance on the world,' some people say. We may protest such an image of God, but we can't deny that sometimes His will is very difficult to figure out when tragedy hits, and it does seem that we are being punished.

The hard sayings of Jesus in today's Gospel are part of what is sometimes called "the Gospel of the sword." When Luke wrote these words, Christians were having a very hard time of it: there were internal fights over belief going on, aggravated by persecution from the authorities. This was hardly the image of early Church history that we often like to imagine: an early period in which everybody got along and believed the same thing. No, when Luke writes the Lord's words about family members turning on each other and Christians being hauled in by the police, he wasn't threatening something for the future, but describing the present. This was one of the earliest scandals in a Church history with more than its share of scandals:

and all on account of the One who said that He was going to found a great brotherhood, a huge family, to bring peace and justice to the earth!

It is one of the paradoxes of Christianity that it has brought both war and peace in this world. Jesus can sometimes sound almost schizophrenic when he tells us, "My peace I leave you," and then in today's reading warn, "I have come to bring fire to the earth."

But all of this can help us to remember that neither life in general nor even love is an easy thing. Those of you who have been through tough times, either as individuals or as couples and families, know that the deepest, most lasting of loves is not the youthful romantic kind, but the seasoned, tried and battle-scarred variety.

Jesus did not join our human race as some kind of space alien totally removed from the problems and challenges of real-life existence. He came into life just as it is, and from the day of his birth never enjoyed the luxury of being free from stress or problems. It is from the mess of real life that he speaks and tells us that the Gospel message will not be just a means of reconciliation, but also of division, as the implications of God's way becomes more obviously not the way of the world at large.

An adage that I once learned that remains true for me is that it is not only one's friends that make you who you are, but also your enemies! Because if you stand for something important enough and good enough, you are bound to have people who will stand in your way. They will help to define you as who you are!

So it is with Jesus and his "hard sayings," too. Christians were never meant to be pushovers: weak and wishy-washy creatures who had no backbone and could be swayed to any action if it avoided conflict. No, the Christian Church was meant to be a two-edged sword, helping the people of God to decide who they were and what they stood for. It's not a matter of looking for a fight, but it's not shirking the conflict if God's will and God's principles must be defended.

“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” This is the epistle writer’s reminder that there *are* those who have shed their blood in defense of what they know is true. May God grant us not to be brought to the time of trial; but if we are, may he also grant us the courage of our faith, the encouragement of the “cloud of witnesses” urging us on, and the ability to put aside all the weight of sin and illusion that would compromise the gospel that is our Christian life.