

Life is nothing if not a series of forks in the road, decisions waiting to be made. And often, the consequences of those decisions will have effects more far-reaching and determinative than we ever imagined at the decisive moment.

What might my life have looked like had I not decided to go to a Church meeting at the age of 19 to listen to the Bishop of Matabeleland Robert Mercer? And where might I have ended up, had I not decided to meet his predecessor three years later who had become the Bishop of Ludlow?

Each one of these was a choice I made, a small choice in the grand scheme of things, but a choice that ended up affecting the direction of my entire life. And usually, I'm glad I made it — usually.

But, you know, it's not always easy being a Christian...

Jesus understood that his way was not always the easiest way to follow. Later, when the writers and editors of the Gospels wrote down their versions of Jesus' life, the list of Christian martyrs was already a long one. Peter and Paul had died with some 2,000 other Christians in Nero's purges. Stephen had been stoned to death and James had been thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple and then beaten to death when the fall didn't kill him. Those early chroniclers of Christianity had come to realise that Christianity, or what they called, "The Way" was a road that was rarely easy to follow and often littered with obstacles, trials, pitfalls, difficulties, and, sometimes, bodies.

That reality is made fully if painfully clear in the Gospel for today and, if we want to be serious about our lives as Christians, we would do well to look carefully at this difficult passage and heed it as we renew daily our faith. The first three verses make that point clearly: "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49).

Jesus' pronouncement that he had come to bring fire to the earth was an example of good news and bad news. This is hardly the "Jesus, good above all other, gentle child of gentle mother," that we have come to love and expect from that lovely hymn. This is not the soft spoken, mild mannered, inoffensive Jesus of the old paintings and movies of our youth. This is a Jesus who has good news and bad news and he delivers it in the form of a metaphor: fire.

To the ancient near-eastern listeners for whom these words were first spoken, fire was both a gift and a curse. It was a wonderful tool to be used with caution because it had terrible destructive potential. Fire warmed the home, lighted the darkness, and purified that which was contaminated. But it also had the potential to destroy the very house that it warmed and inflict terrible pain and suffering on those to whom it gave comfort.

The Gospel writer, Luke, understood that delicate balance that fire represented in the symbolic life of the church. The Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the real presence of God's kingdom in this life, was like fire, he said. It has the power to light the darkness in our lives. It has the power to warm our hearts when they are cold and to purify our lives when they are contaminated and soiled with sin and estrangement.

But there is another side to the Gospel, a side about which we do not often hear or speak, air brushed out by polite modern Anglicanism, a side which can cause pain, tears, and division even within families. "I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!" (Luke 12:50).

For years, when scholars read this verse about the baptism that Jesus was yet to experience and the anticipation of which was placing so much stress on his life, they assumed that he was talking about his crucifixion. But I have come to believe with more recent scholarship that the baptism metaphor represents a broader and more inclusive kind of conflict, one which culminated with his death but included other kinds of conflict and opposition.

The word, “completed,” can also be translated as “concluded” meaning that Jesus was talking about not one event but a series of events or a process that would unfold in stages - the opposition of the Pharisees, the contempt of the priests, the rejection by those in his own home town, the arrest by the priests, the betrayal of Judas, Peter, and even his closest friends, the scourging, the suffering, and, finally the crucifixion.

Jesus understood that “The Way” was not going to be easy for him and neither is it going to be easy for those who choose to follow him in it. We see that clearly in the Acts of the Apostles and Paul’s letters. Later he would speak of his road as one upon which you must “take up your cross.” Finally, in verse 51 he laid it all out for even the most clueless listener. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” And then he followed up this general statement with several examples of the kind of division and conflict that the Gospel can cause. Groups of friends can be divided against each other; even families can find themselves in conflict over the demands of the Gospel.

I remember telling my family in 1983 that I was going to Zimbabwe out into the bush to be a teacher missionary at the age of 21- boy were they not happy! Why would I want to go into a recent war zone, a Marxist government that was anti the Church, where white people were being kidnapped? I must have had rocks in my head. All the latent dislikes of the institutional church in my family came to the fore. They couldn’t believe that anyone in the late 20th Century would possibly want to serve Christ and his Church- it was a joke. Let alone go to an African country coming out of a civil war. For the first time aged 21 I got to see that my family who habitually worshipped at my home parish, beyond their natural concern, were not so connected in their faith as I thought and believed. Then later upon return, alive and well, members of my family especially my brothers took a very dim view of my calling to ordination, they saw it a such a waste when I could have been an architect, or a solicitor. The whole enterprise was doomed to failure in their eyes, materially and physically. I still have a brother who thinks I made unwise decisions. In effect a loser. There are those I bump into in priestly life- many respectful and kind, but also those who see your collar and sneer for all sorts of reasons projected and otherwise.

Although the kingdom of God is (usually) characterised by reconciliation and peace, the announcement of that kingdom is always divisive because it requires decision and commitment. The Christian life is a decision and it is one that is not going to please everyone. And that is as it should be. Christianity, if we do it right, is going to make some people pretty angry and they will want to change it.

By deciding for Christ, we decide against other things. Those who have decided for those things are going to understandably be opposed to and even angry with us. They will see us as the opposition to be toppled and, indeed, we are. Be clear about that, brothers and sisters, we are, in some areas, the enemy. We who have taken the words of Jesus seriously will be seen as the enemy and it’s never easy being the enemy, as we seen time after time in the history of the Church. It’s natural to desire

the approval and affection of those around us. We all want to be liked. But Jesus calls us to a life that holds other things as more valuable than the approval of society, authority figures and peers. Some things, he said in Luke's Gospel, are more important than even parental approval.

We live in the post- Christian era of Australian history. No longer does the church and synagogue determine the normative morals and values of our society. Popular culture and pseudo-scientific, pop psychology have taken up the task and we have gladly turned it over to them. Our generation has been like the veritable frog in the kettle. The result is a society that clings to traditional ideas and virtues but only in principle. In practice, we treat them as personal options that we can accept or reject at our intellectual convenience. In a culture such as this, those who stand for any absolute will inevitably be seen as dangerous freaks to be attacked, mocked and discredited.

The Gospel this morning teaches us that there is both good news and bad news. The good news is that God has weighed us and judged us, and by the grace and love of Jesus Christ, has found us acceptable. The Creator of all that is, desires for us to come and sit at a banquet table that has been prepared for us and be God's adopted sons and daughters. The Lord of history requests the pleasure of your company. And the bad news is that just as sure as we say yes to that kingdom, that family, that life to which God has called us, we're going to end up making somebody very angry. But only if we do it right.

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