20th Sunday of Year c 2019

This is the first gospel I ever preached on as young trainee priest. I wish I could remember what I said about it - because it is definitely a bit of a challenge. Jesus the great unifier, the great bringer of peace is telling us that he has come to divide families. Sadly all too many families don’t need his help with that…

I think what I probably did say, all those years ago, was that we must go under his words to see what he is really getting at. It was the custom of his day and culture to sometimes express ideas in an extreme way - so as to increase their force - it is still done today, of course.

Though throughout history - and certainly when this gospel was being written - it is the case that these words will be literally true. Families were and still are divided by matters of faith. Disunity, disharmony brings grief and destroys the people involved. I think we must always be guided by what we know of Jesus’s central teaching - to love, to endure, to forgive - to find the peaceful way.

So how should we read these hard words? I think we first need to admit their difficulty. Jesus is speaking with the utmost seriousness and passion - “I have come to bring fire to the earth’. He is not here to sprinkle a little fairy dust about, to be nice, to be the bit of glitter on the birthday card! What he is about is utterly serious - it is to reshape humanity. To make hearts burn with the zeal that he feels - zeal for truth, zeal for justice, zeal to defeat all the negative things that eat away at life - zeal for life in its fulness. For these things he is going to undergo and incredible journey of suffering, death and resurrection - his baptism. And how great is his distress until it is over.

We are offered, week in week out, the invitation to be with him in this profound, life-changing journey. He will not leave us in peace - it is too important for that. Sometimes we just have to be uncomfortable.