

St Andrew's Church Sunday 16th September 2018
10.00am Parish Eucharist
The Very Revd. John Guille

Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

The 20th-century theologian Karl Barth reportedly advised preachers to prepare sermons with the Bible in one hand and a current newspaper in the other. Obviously, he wanted the Bible to inform us and advise us, for good or bad, about what is going on in our time. In our own day, it might still be a newspaper but, he might have also included television, radio or indeed Facebook and Twitter. However, any of us who try to keep in touch with current affairs are very aware I'm sure, what some commentators might call "tribalism". Think of the deep divisions which seem to have emerged under President Trump in the United States of America, think of the ongoing arguments for and against Brexit in the UK and the threats of major splits within the Conservative and Labour parties. Nearer to home, we know that in our own community within five weeks we will have our first-ever referendum, and the whole subject of island-wide voting could become divisive. We don't need reminding that such issues can so easily become heated.

Of course, there is nothing new in this because we are all aware how the Pharisees goaded Jesus and his followers into becoming deadly enemies. They tried every means to trick him, to trip him up, to prove he was wrong, and to show that only they were right. If Jesus said it, it must be wrong. If they believed it, it must be right. This acceptance of conflict has echoes in our time. Think of events at Westminster once more and the recent resignation of the Member of Parliament Frank Field, who resigned from the Labour Party in the last 10 days, and in a sense, the outworking of tribalism that followed.

One commentator suggests, in reflecting upon the concept of tribalism, that the great attractions of tribalism is that you don't actually have to think very much. You only need "to know on any given subject... which side you're on... A tribal leader calls the shots, and everything slips into place. After a while, your immersion in tribal loyalty makes the activities of another tribe not just alien but close to incomprehensible." As an example, he quotes George Orwell. The great social critic suggested that a function of tribalism holds that, "There is no crime, absolutely none, that cannot be condoned when 'our' side commits it." This is a belief that anything done by me – by us – must be okay, and whatever is done by you – by them – must be wrong. When we stop to think about it this blinkered way of thinking is horrifying. And this is where the Bible side of Barth's pairing comes in. We juxtapose the redeeming truth of our Lord, the Good News of God, against the bad news of division we encounter so frequently in our time.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells those who would lay their trust in him: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Giving substance to this cross of self-denial can propel us into a reality more likely to transform the Us *against* Them, (the sickness of our time), into

something more God-like. Through the fundamental and essential nature of our faith, we can reveal in word and action a new Us/Them reality.

We dare not forget how Jesus teaches us to take up the cross of self-denial, commanding us to love one another as we so readily love ourselves. To turn love into more than a noun, making it a powerful verb of caring. To remember that Christian love is the transforming example of the Good Samaritan – love and care given without hope or desire of receiving anything in return, given *without* strings, given only because of the other's need.

If we can act with such a faith, maybe we can turn destructive tribalism on its head and live as a different type of tribe – one that Jesus models – one opposite from the divisive and self-serving kind of tribes of which we are too readily aware. Maybe we can become a kingdom tribe of Christians – a tribe *for* others.

Maybe we can be a community of people – who at best are what we already are – the body of Christ, working together with committed allegiance to the same powers of creation that Jesus embodied – rejecting and opposing the harmful and divisive and negative ways of thinking, so characteristic of tribalism and putting an end to the winner-take-all mentality that infects our cultural health. This surely is what we must aspire to.

So let us commit ourselves afresh to stopping the cycle of demonizing the other, with any insistence that we alone are right and open ourselves to the value we know the others possess – as beloved children of God. Then, under God, just as pebbles thrown into a big pond make ripples, so we can begin to make a difference. Amen