

### Discipleship - 4 September 2022.

It might seem a curious statement, but dogs are a stimulus for intellectual debate - at least, I find mine to be so.

Walking with them on Friday morning at the Rec Centre, Sheila and I met up with some of our usual friends, one of whom started discussing art with Sheila - who, for those of you who didn't know - is a talented pastel painter. The discussion arose because our grandsons had been to an art exhibition and had not fallen in love with Picasso's cubist period, which I can sympathize with.

Then the whole subject of mixing colours and shapes arose between Sheila and our friend (who is not an artist). Not being an artist

myself (of the painting variety) I did not take part in this discussion to start with, but then I said that musicians actually 'paint' with notes, try out different harmonies, instruments, and so on, so we are not really any different. If this colour doesn't work - or that shape - it is similar to the musician trying out different harmonies or instrument combinations.

The point of this waffle is to show how similar it is to the potter having to make a different pot than the one he or she first thought of when they started. It depends on circumstances - and that is what God is saying to Jeremiah; 'I have a vision for what I want

to do with you ('you' being the house of Israel in this context), but the shape of that vision (the finished pot) will depend on the state in which I find you. If you are being good, then good things will happen; if you are being bad - look out!

I remember well learning this lesson when I was very small and my mother had been trying to show me how to knit. Being an ambitious boy of about 4 or 5 at this time, I said to my mother that I was going to knit a pair of socks. "OK", she said, "let's see how we get along".

For all you knitters out there, you will be laughing as you will know that socks are not at

all easy to make, and for a starting 4 year old, I was biting off far more than I could chew.

What I ended up with was a square 'mat' - I use the word loosely - which was full of holes and re-starts, and we decided it would be a good thing for the teapot to rest on.

I was so proud of it until the teapot burned an even bigger hole in it, and it was consigned to the rubbish bin.

We have to understand that we are malleable in God's hands, and He meets us where we are - not where we'd like to be.

Which brings me on to our psalm, which can either be read in a spirit of wonder and awe, or in a state of terror at the realization of the

unlimited power of God. I prefer wonder and awe.

The segue from Jeremiah is that God is meeting us where we are - and that means there is nowhere that He cannot reach us. There are moments when we feel we are completely abandoned by God, as Jesus did, but even there God was watching and in control. Read the turn around in psalm 22, which starts with, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' - and ends with a shout of praise 'He has done it!' Or feel the thick glue of despair in psalm 88, which ends with, '... darkness is my closest friend.'

So, wherever you are, or in whatever state you may be, God is right there with you. Now that can be very reassuring - or it can be decidedly unnerving, particularly if you are doing, or have been doing something you shouldn't.

Therefore, dodging the Philemon reading, which for my sermon this morning is irrelevant, I want to look at the gospel from Luke.

When I was looking for pictures to go into my art gallery for this morning, I came across one which was really a cartoon, with Lego characters in it. One is saying to Jesus, "I hate my father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, and myself." The

Jesus Lego character is saying back to him in a speech bubble, "OK - you're in."

'Ay, there's the rub', as Hamlet said in his famous soliloquy on suicide. The 'rub' he is referring to is actually a bowls term which mean an obstacle on the bowls lawn that diverts the bowl, so in his speech it means the fear of the life hereafter is the obstacle that makes us pause and perhaps change the direction of our thinking.

Which is where I want us to be right now, as the joke of the cartoon is actually on us. When the Lego character says he 'hates' his mother, father, brother, sister, and so on - he

probably means it. And that's the problem - so do you.

I know several of you who have told me that you really don't like a member of your family and haven't spoken to them for years - because they're a jerk or worse.

Unfortunately for you, this is where the trap snaps shut.

"Oh no!" - you exclaim, "but Jesus just said that was what I had to do to follow him!"

And this is where an understanding of ancient language gives the lie to what you thought was OK. I mean, seriously folks, where else does Jesus say anything about 'hating'? He even

tells us in the Sermon on the Mount to 'love our enemies!' You can't have it both ways.

This passage has often been a stumbling block for many people. The word hate, or 'μισῆι' in the Greek, is, as far as we know, the word that Jesus used - although he would have used an Aramaic version of it (sana).

The problem - as always - lies with the literalists who wish to take the word out of its historical context.

Just as there is apparently no word for 'like' in Arabic, you either love or hate someone - so too in Jesus' day it was not unusual to use hyperbolic language to make a point. Here Jesus is saying that we need to love our family members 'less than' him, if we are to be true

disciples. This is because there may be a massive cost asked of us - we may have to choose between freedom or execution. This still happens today where communist regimes will torture Christians to renounce their faith. It happens in China, Russia, Nepal, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Don't think that there aren't martyrs for Christ even today.

The use of the word 'hate' is found elsewhere in the bible, and in contexts where it clearly cannot mean 'hate' in the sense we use it today.

1 John 4:20 says, 'If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who

does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.'

Again I emphasize that we are being asked to love Jesus 'more than' our families - not hate them.

Genesis, and the story of Jacob marrying both Leah and Rachel caused problems: 'And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years. And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren.'

I don't want to get into too many examples or your eyes will glaze over again - but I hope my point is made; it was not unusual for speakers

to make emphasis by using hyperbolic language in Jesus' day and in Old Testament times also.

So, to those of you who find yourselves caught in the trap of family feuds and sibling hatred, perhaps it is time to to ask yourselves whether what you are doing is truly compatible with your professed love for Christ.

As happens commonly in AA, we have two steps that address this very issue - steps 8 and 9, which come in the eighth and ninth months of the year - that's August and September - right now - so it's a good time to be looking at them. They are;

8. Make a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Now I know from personal experience that it isn't always easy to go and bury the hatchet with a close relative, when what you really want to do is bury it firmly between their eyes or shoulder blades - but the injunction in Step 8 is '...to become willing to make amends...'

It may not happen overnight - in fact, if it did I would doubt your sincerity - but if you make the subject of your 'hate' the subject of your prayers for a couple of weeks, you may just find that your attitude changes, and in a

month or two you may be ready to make the peace.

You know you need to do this because Jesus told you in so many words that before you come to the altar, you need to make peace with whoever is the subject of your hate; in Matthew 5:24 he says, 'leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.'

We have to ask ourselves what is this gift that we bring to the altar? It is surely not an animal sacrifice after the cross of Jesus has put all that into the past - so what is it?

It is none other than your very soul for which you are asking grace for forgiveness. How can you bring that up to the altar rail if it is still stained with the metaphorical blood of your hatred of another person?

Perhaps it is time to make amends - and if you can't, then it's time to come and see me. That's what I'm here for. I don't have all the answers - but as sure as hell, I'll struggle with you in love and prayer.