

This difficult passage from St Matthew's Gospel is about conflict and paradox.

It comes from a much longer speech to the disciples,

which Jesus gives with the shadow of the final journey into Jerusalem looming ahead;  
a journey that will inevitably culminate in his death on the cross.

Matthew's gospel is written very much from a Jewish perspective;  
that is, a gospel for a primarily Jewish audience,

with its long-held longing and expectation of God's Messiah, the Prince of Peace.

Yet Matthew introduces conflict and paradox early on

when the birth of the Prince of Peace sets in motion the carnage

that is called the Massacre of the Innocents.

In this case, Jesus and his family turn away from the conflict and escape to Egypt.

His birth has unsheathed a sword indeed; Herod's sword.

And here, in this morning's gospel reading,

in the middle of this list of seemingly unrelated sayings,

Jesus says, *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth;*

*I have not come to bring peace, but a sword;*

a sword, it seems, that will cut through family ties

and create enemies within one's own household;

a saying that contradicts all we think we know about Jesus.

What can he possibly mean?

Jesus is preparing for his death.

he's also preparing his disciples for his death and their life and work beyond,

though they are unaware of this.

There is a stark warning here about the nature of some of the conflicts they will encounter; the opposition they will face as his disciples.

It's a warning to us too, about the nature of some of the conflicts we will encounter and the opposition *we* will face if *we* remain disciples of his.

Jesus is not setting out to divide families, but recognising that within families and households and every community there will be times when we find ourselves challenged by the views or behaviour of another and it's whether we put our relationship with them first or our relationship with Jesus.

And here's the paradox:

If we put our relationship with Jesus first, we *are* putting love first.

Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved us and his love is a challenging love, a demanding love, a self-emptying love, a total, gratuitous outpouring of love, a sometimes costly love, a love that has counted every hair on our head.

C. S. Lewis says this,

*When I love God more than I love my earthly nearest and dearest, I will then discover that I love my earthly nearest and dearest more than I did before.*

Loving God draws us closer to the source of all love.

But it's not just attachment to people that causes conflict.

There's attachment to social or political or religious ideologies.

There's attachment to stuff – materialism.

We live in a world full of temptations; a world where we have to make constant decisions about whether this or that compromises or challenges our faith; whether we should let something go, because it helps keep the peace,

but peace at what price?

Short term peace is gained perhaps at the expense of long term peace;

instant gratification at the expense of long-term stability.

Short-termism.

And the easiest sin to commit and perhaps the most dangerous,

is the sin of self-justification.

Isn't it so easy to justify ourselves?

It's just a little lie – more of an exaggeration really.

Well, she did ask for it – she was horrid to me first.

Ah, but the fireproof cladding is more expensive and they won't complain because they're poor.

So have no fear of them;

*for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered,*

*and nothing secret that will not become known.*

*What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light;*

*and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.*

Well, in the case of the housetop of Grenfell Tower,

the truth was uncovered in the most excruciating, appalling way

and it's a challenge for all of us, not just those in charge or those responsible,

because, in a way, it's so easy to simply search around for someone to blame,

without recognising that our own silence

about the way the poor and marginalised are seen – or rather, not seen,

plays a part in allowing their suffering to happen.

Now, don't get me wrong.

I am in no way holding any of us personally responsible for the Grenfell Tower fire,

that's not what I'm suggesting.

But Jesus calls us to speak up for the oppressed and marginalised  
and sometimes I think the church is strangely silent  
and sometimes I think it's easier for us not to see what's happening right here and now  
because it's too challenging .

We can't change it anyway.

We can't house the homeless people on the streets of Cambridge.

We can't accommodate all the refugees who have poured out of Syria and other places  
or bring about peace.

And how can we bridge the ever-widening gap

between the very poorest and the very richest in our society?

Now, I don't want you to go home breast-beating and depressed  
because there must be good news in every sermon that carries a challenge.

At 3.00 am on the morning of the fire, with the Tower still blazing,  
the vicar of St Clement's Church, Notting Hill was woken by a priest who lived in the block.  
*so I came down to the church, opened the doors and turned the lights on, he said*  
*It all began from there. People started coming in out of the dark.*

***People started coming in out of the dark***

People started coming out of the dark into the light.

The church quickly became more like a warehouse or refugee camp  
with food and provisions arriving in a constant stream.

All because the vicar came down and turned on the lights.

This, by the way, is deemed to be a failing parish  
because it doesn't pull in the numbers on a Sunday morning.

All over the country there are church initiatives; food banks,  
meals for the lonely and hungry, holiday clubs in deprived areas.

There's the Church Homeless project in Cambridge,  
that a number of us heard all about recently.

The vicar of St Clement's, Notting Hill, says,

*We are called to share in the brokenness and the forgottenness of the people we serve,*

So when we pray for the people of Grenfell Tower,

When we pray into that darkness and sorrow,

when we pray into the darkness and fear of homelessness, war,

terrorism, loneliness, addiction injustice, inequity ...

What is it that we hear Jesus say to *us* in the dark that we need to tell in the light?

What is it that we hear whispered in *our* ears that we need to proclaim from the housetops?

These are not words intended simply for a bunch of followers 2,000 years ago.

These are words that speak down the centuries to us as individuals and communities now.

And it's not just about turning the light on and waiting for people to come –

people often *do* come in times of crisis.

It's about going out and being out there too.

I had an email this week from one of James' former parishioners who came to the licensing.

She thanked me for the labyrinth, which she discovered the previous evening.

She had an interesting reflection,

saying how surprised she had been

not to simply be led into the centre of the labyrinth, as she expected,

but to be led in, only to be led out again.

It seems to me that if we see Jesus at the centre,  
we find ourselves to be drawn towards him  
and then being sent out to draw others to him;  
that if we love him first, we will then know how to love others  
and - our earthly nearest and dearest, more than we did before.