



Sermon: - 20th August 2017

Peace at any price?

Psalm 133; Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32

This week, as I was planning the sermon, three random things came together in a way that made a sort of sense to me. The first was the incidents in Charlottesville and Barcelona, ... how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! How ironic that this week, a week in which we have been horrified by the results of hatred, seeing destruction and death splattered across our television screens, the lectionary passages speak of peace and unity and God's mercy. There was no peace and unity in Charlottesville, or Barcelona this week. Where was the sign of God's mercy in broken bodies, devastated lives, fear, anger and hatred? One commentator likened a photographic image of Charlottesville to Picasso's Guernica, this image that is on the screen. In April 1937, in fascist Europe General Franco had arranged for German and Italian warplanes to bombard the town of Guernica. Terror rained down from the sky: hundreds of civilians were killed, but military targets were left unscathed. In the aftermath of this cruel and barbaric act Picasso began this iconic painting. In "Guernica" we see a moment of terror conveyed through a jumble of forms and fragments that, although they seem human, they also seem to make no sense. That is the point Picasso was making. Indiscriminate violence against innocent people makes no sense.

The second random occurrence was that I went to a couple of events at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. One was an event where the television journalist Kirsty Wark and James Runcie, author, producer and film-maker, talked about their three favourite books written by Scottish authors. After they had each discussed their first two choices interviewer asked them to name their third choice.

Kirsty Wark's was Kidnapped, and James Runcie's was also ... Kidnapped! They then went on to talk about why they thought this was such a great book and at one point in the conversation they mentioned a comment made by Alan Breck to David Balfour. Robert Louis Stevenson took the whole chapter to describe a long and involved quarrel between the two characters. At the end of the quarrel Alan Breck says, "just precisely what I thought I liked about ye, was that ye never quarrelled – and now I like ye better!" We might think that's a slightly strange comment. Why would Breck like Balfour better after a quarrel?

The third thing was that I was working on my doctoral thesis. It is almost finished and I expect to submit within the next couple weeks. Part of what I'm studying is conflict and how we respond to it and deal with it and as I was working through that chapter it seemed particularly relevant in view of the other events of this week. In my studies, I've come across some very interesting insights into conflict. It will be no surprise to you to hear that conflict has been integral to human interaction throughout history and continues to play a significant role in our relationships today. For hundreds of years, human beings have studied issues of conflict resolution. Particularly in the aftermath of two world wars, in the 1950s and 1960s, strategies for and skills of conflict resolution began to be developed.

I also read that conflict is inevitable – we can't avoid it; however hard we may try! That sounds a bit depressing but then I discovered, surprisingly, that conflict is not necessarily a bad thing, it is actually essential. It highlights problems which may otherwise remain unnoticed; it can promote or provoke positive change; it often stimulates creative thinking in the search for a solution. Conflict, when it is acknowledged and worked through, can actually strengthen a relationship and in fact, only superficial relationships have no conflict. And I think that was Alan Breck's point. It was only after he and David Balfour had quarrelled that the relationship achieved a new level of openness and honesty and the friendship was deepened. It's strange that, in view of this, we don't have many positive words to describe conflict, yet conflict is natural, normal and necessary.

But then we see these disturbing images on our television screens. We see the aftermath of conflict and it doesn't look natural or normal and it certainly isn't necessary.

How do we reconcile these two contradictory aspects of conflict; it may be normal, natural, and necessary but what about when the outcome is unnatural, devastating, and destructive. It is a long time since the world has been so divided. And how do we reconcile conflict at any level with the Psalm? In this atmosphere of diversity and division, what exactly does it mean to have unity?

Does it mean uniformity, where everyone thinks exactly the same on every issue? Or does it mean harmony, where people get along even though they have different ideas? Is everyone in the church supposed to think the same ideas, or are we supposed to be united in faith, hope, and love. Is this a call to have one voice, or a call to be a choir singing different parts in harmony?

Think of the Apostle Paul's statement that the church is the Body of Christ with many members. Included in that is a multiplicity of gifts, a variety of ministries, a spiritual union of male and female, rich and poor, black and white, Jew and Gentile, and every other type of difference you can imagine. That such diverse people could be united is the miracle of the church.

And course often it doesn't happen, and the church, just as much as the world is a place of conflict. But then, if conflict can be a good thing perhaps the point of unity is not absence of conflict, but what we do with conflict. As my studies have taught me, conflict, properly dealt with, can be a force for good, not evil.

The people who perpetrated the violence in Charlottesville and Barcelona acted out of hatred and anger. Their views are at odds with the views of others but rather than seeking to resolve differences by peaceful means, which could have led to greater understanding, they resorted to violence. The violence didn't arise out of the difference of opinion, it arose out of hatred for those who had a difference of opinion and this is a crucial difference. Differing from one another is not the problem, and doesn't lead to lack of unity. Arguing with one another is not the problem and doesn't lead to lack of unity. Being angry with one another is not the problem and doesn't lead to lack of unity. What does lead to lack of unity is allowing our differences, our arguments, and even our anger to lead to hatred instead of working to gain a better understanding of one another.

And this is the task for the church; yes, to express our differences, yes, to think differently from one another, to have different opinions, even to some extent to have different beliefs within the broad spectrum of Christianity, but not to allow these differences to develop into hatred of those who disagree with us. In dealing with conflict, we won't necessarily change anyone's mind but if we can come to a greater understanding of why someone thinks the way they do, believes what they believe, we may find it easier to accept those differences. It's difficult! It's a tough call, we want to persuade other people that our way is the right way, we believe that we are right and that those who disagree with us are wrong. But if we don't learn to live with difference then conflict escalates beyond a difference of opinion into something which hurts, harms, and damages.

Alan Breck and David Balfour had a difference of opinion. They quarrelled about it, but in the quarrel, they came to understand one another better and in the end, became better friends because of it. And in the same way, our mission in the church is to understand one

another better, to use our differences as building blocks in a rich and diverse fellowship where many are welcome because being different is not a barrier to being friends.

It's no wonder that Jesus prayed as he did just before his death. "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:20, 21) The success of God's mission depends on the unity of the church.

This world has enough of fear and discrimination and hatred and anger. It doesn't need more in the church. And the answer to a Charlottesville or a Barcelona, is not the violence of anger and recrimination. As Paul said, be angry but do not sin. We can be angry about Charlottesville and Barcelona, but the way of peace is not the way of retaliation. How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity, for there God commands the blessing. When we accept that conflict is part of life, when we accept that disagreements are going to happen, when we accept that difference is here to stay and learn to welcome those with whom we disagree, there is the blessing! There is Christian fellowship, not because everyone thinks the same, or because everyone believes the same, but because we can work together for the same cause, and because we accept that just because we don't agree with one another doesn't mean that those with whom we disagree are any less Christian, or any less faithful. And the more people can live together with their differences, accepting one another even in the midst of disagreement, the more others will be drawn to that unity in diversity, and there, indeed, God will command the blessing.