



Sermon preached by Revd David Tatem on 22nd January 2023

Readings: Matthew 4:12-23; Isaiah 9:1-4; Corinthians 1:10-18

Next Sunday my wife and I are going to a dance performance in Wuppertal in Germany. To be more accurate it's in the Barmen district of Wuppertal and while we are there I am going to show her a piece of sculpture that stands in a pedestrian precinct in the centre. It depicts a crowd of people standing with their arms raised in a Nazi salute but at the back of the crowd and facing the other way with their backs turned to what is happening there is a smaller group of people who are standing together around a Bible. The sculpture is close to the Gemaker Kirche where in May 1934 the synod of Barmen was held. The synod was the first united synod of representatives from the different Protestant traditions in Germany, it was held just after the National Socialists had come to power and Hitler had become the Chancellor and very much under the guidance of Karl Barth produced the Barmen Declaration. That declaration described simply, said that faith in and allegiance to Jesus Christ was incompatible with allegiance to National Socialism and it was the founding document of the Confessing Church in Germany which stood out against Hitler and the rise of Nazism despite the fact that effectively the rest of the church not only acquiesced but often blessed the steps that were being taken in the Third Reich for reasons to do with nationalism and under the influence of what today we would call populism.

Many members of the Confessing Church it almost goes without saying, paid for their allegiance with their lives.

There's a connection there, I would suggest, with the passage from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth where Paul pleads with them to be united in mind and purpose and complains about the divisions that there are which are based on their separate allegiances to Paul, or Apollos or Cephas or even interestingly to Christ. The fact that Jesus is also included in the list is interesting because you might imagine that Paul would say, well that's the right one! But it's there deliberately to help us to see what Paul is actually getting at. The problem is that they have turned in on themselves and they have become self-obsessed and effectively, with who is right and who is wrong and when that takes hold then the ability to look outwards, to be sensitive to what is going on in the world around becomes blunted and it is characteristics such as compassion and empathy that suffer. Faith begins to become mechanical, it comes to be about ticking the right box, being in the right group and that starts to introduce the dynamic of us and them and us against them or them against us. That's the kind of dynamic, of course, which is very easy to find in many expressions of nationalism and which sets up particular sets of priorities which are less about compassion and more about for example the ruthless protection of borders against undesirables and when that comes to be seen as a Christian duty, we are in deep trouble.

Reading the passage from Matthew's Gospel takes us back to an earlier stage in the history of the church, which is helpful for setting the context that the early church found itself in.

That whole section that our Gospel passage today is part of has the feel of a narrative that is stripped down to carry the reader along quickly to focus on certain key events one after the other and then bring the reader to a particular point of understanding.

It's a bit of a roller coaster. John appears with no preamble at the start of chapter 3, there's no back story about his parents or upbringing; he preaches repentance, he runs into conflict with

the Pharisees and Sadducees who he calls a brood of vipers, he baptises Jesus and we have God's declaration that Jesus is his beloved son – all of this is in chapter 3 . Then, at the start of chapter 4, after having gone through his experience of being tempted in the wilderness Jesus hears that John has been arrested and he immediately responds to this news by moving to Capernaum, not to escape but to take up the mantle of John in his own way and with a bigger agenda, he begins to declare that the Kingdom of God has come near and then in seemingly quick succession he calls his first four disciples all of whom immediately leave their boats and nets and family members and follow Jesus. Again there is no back story about how he may or may not have known them before this, its part of the flow of events that Matthew is describing. He then goes off through Galilee preaching the Good News of the Kingdom, preaching in their synagogues and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Its a use of language that is intended to have a strong impact. From the disciples leaving their nets immediately to Jesus curing every disease and sickness we are surely intended to get a very clear message that something pretty uncompromising and determined is going on and it all seems to have been triggered by the arrest of John, with his 'brood of vipers' language. It's the point where the disagreement between the values and ideology of Empire, in which the Pharisees and Sadducees are caught up and the values of the Kingdom of God ceases to be just a disagreement and becomes confrontation. Jesus curing every disease and every sickness is surely an indication of the priority of compassion over the other considerations with which empire builders might concern themselves.

I suggested earlier on in our sharing together time that we might look upon the calling of the first disciples as being the birthday of the church rather than Pentecost, which we traditionally mark as the birthday and we can develop that idea a little. It's significant that the calling of the disciples isn't left out or put later on by Matthew. When they respond immediately it's indicating that their calling and response is a crucial element in what's going on. Jesus does it before he goes through Galilee preaching and healing because he isn't just gathering supporters to his cause he is deliberately beginning to create a community around him which is to become an alternative to the empire with its love of power and control and its demand for submission and tribute, he is setting up, if you like, the original confessing church.

And Matthew has not finished with his list of key events, because once we get into chapters 5 to 7 we come to the sermon on the mount and the beatitudes. I shouldn't, of course, start on that in detail because the beatitudes are next Sunday's gospel reading and that is perhaps for someone else, but I do want to suggest that when you look at those chapters it's clear that they are all about the values, priorities and lifestyle of the Kingdom. Here is God's alternative which the community of Jesus' followers, who later on he will call his friends, is called to live and witness to. It's more than a blueprint it's a description of the nature and lifeblood of this radically different way of being.

Jesus goes on gathering disciples, building the prototype of his alternative community and they are a diverse bunch of men and women, with a variety of characteristics, personal histories, gifts, strengths and weaknesses. We tend perhaps to think its just the 12 but we know it's more. Mary, Martha and Lazarus aren't part of the 12 but they are very clearly part of the group he is close to and working with and Luke talks about Jesus sending out the 70 in pairs and Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 says that Jesus appeared to 500 of the brothers and sister after his resurrection. Again, exact detail doesn't matter what does matter is that this new community, the Followers of the Way are to live by and exhibit this very different set of characteristics, such as love of enemies for example, things that reach deep down into human nature and challenges us and certainly the values of empire at a fundamental level.

And of course, the church has not lived up to it, time and time and time again and then sometimes it does and groups of believers and individual Christians, maybe despite the church,

grasp and live out God's alternative, albeit imperfectly but with their faces turned deliberately in that direction. Think of that sculpture in the centre of Barmen.

And it's why the search for Christian Unity is so important not in order to join up organisations or certainly to create uniformity but in order to facilitate a process, guided by the Spirit, that enables us to recognise and value the gifts of the wonderful diversity that makes us who we are. That process, when we enter into it, makes it possible for us to encourage, strengthen, enrich and sometimes challenge and correct one another and for us to receive all of that ourselves. It helps us to deepen our understanding of the nature of the Kingdom which Jesus constantly brings near and the nature of this thing we call the church.

The image of an orchestra (referred to earlier in the service) is one way of thinking about Christian unity, with many different musicians and instruments blended together, but Paul gave us another one. He gave us the image of the church as the body of Christ, with the unity of many different interdependent parts, an image of organic interconnectedness and whether Paul would have recognised this or not, of synergy, something that is more than just the sum of its parts and which expresses God's alternative.

It's tempting to say something like 'never has the need been greater for the church to express or to be God's alternative' but there have been many times when the same could be said, at times of war and in the face of brutal regimes, but it is clear that there are ways in which it may well be true now.

Climate and environmental scientists tell us that we are running out of time, that the organic interdependence of our world is under extreme threat and that if we are to respond effectively the whole world needs to live by very different sets of priorities, as individuals, as nations and as an international community. It's been on the agenda, once again, of the Davos meeting and we hear news of this step forward or that step forward and then the steps backward. The problem is that there are empires of many different kinds that have other agendas of self interest that have to be confronted.

The experience of the confessing church also tells us that one of the underlying forces that needs to be recognised and responded to is the force of populism and the corresponding abuse of language and communication that tries to sway masses of people and is so often effective. To stand against that and display a different way of talking with one another is what the church is called to do but as Paul understood, when the church itself displays the same kind of behaviour, then it points away from the Kingdom rather than towards it.

So praying for Christian unity, not just a unity of structures, but a unity of mind and purpose is increasingly important but let us not pray out of a sense of despair because Jesus himself has deliberately chose to place into the hands of a fragile and often confused diverse group of people, the task of being God's alternative and we surely cannot but believe that he chose wisely and that in the end the Kingdom will not only come near, but come.