

OUR SPLINTERED WORLD

We live in a splintered world. Each week Time magazine has a section on "The World"- revealing revolution, apartheid, violence, and cruelty, along with occasional good news. There is also a section on "The Nation," frequently revealing these same things closer to home.

There is evidence of splintered families all around us and among us. A cartoon strip showed a young woman talking to a minister. She said, "John and I are having a terrible time, and we need your advice. We are trying to decide how to divide the furniture, who gets what of the money we've saved and who gets custody of the children." The minister asked, "Are you contemplating divorce?" The young woman replied. "Oh, no, we are trying to work out our prenuptial agreement."

There are devout Christian parents who, as far as they know, have tried to maintain a Christian home and serve as attractive Christian examples. However, their sons or daughters turn away from Jesus- to evil companions, to drugs or theft and all the heartache those things bring. These parents can only ask, "Where did we go wrong?" and pray and love the prodigal in the hope that the temptations of this other life will end and the child will come to the father's home again. A SPLINTERED WORLD, INDEED!!

At Jesus' birth the angels sang, "Peace on earth and goodwill to men." It comes as quite a shock, then, to worshipping Christians to be reminded by Jesus himself, as we are in the Gospel for today, that the world was then and is now splintered over Jesus.

"Do you think that I have come to give peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." Jesus lived in the real world. He saw, with sorrow and compassion, the sunlight and the shadows of human nature. He did not delude himself that he would be universally accepted. Our world, from ancient Palestine to modern America, is evidence of the clarity of his vision.

What are the divisions regarding Jesus? There are, of course, those who love him, follow him and serve him: Peter, Paul, Joan of Arc, Mother Teresa and a host of others. Then there are those who try to be neutral toward him; like Pilate, who said, "I find no fault in this person- but see you to it." Like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night and called him "a teacher come from God" and got a sermon on commitment for his trouble. Like some modern people who try to say that Jesus was a good man- but only that and nothing more.

As Pilate discovered, neutrality toward Jesus is not possible. Every person must come down on one side or the other. Jesus said, "He who is not with me is against me." He cannot be "Just a good man." Either he is the son of God as he claimed to be- "I and the father are one" and "he that has seen me has seen the Father"- or

else he is not even a good man, but one of the most audacious liars and first-class frauds that history has produced. No matter how we try to delude ourselves in the attempt, there can be no neutrality toward Jesus. Every person must come down on one side or the other.

Then there are those who despise and reject him—from the Pharisees who engineered his crucifixion to the Turks who ravaged his homeland to modern anti-Christian nations, groups and persons. Today, Christian churches, once open to every passer-by, are kept locked because they are being vandalized and looted with a vicious contempt. Jesus said, “I came to bring division.” The important question for us is this: Where are we in this division? How does this Gospel apply to us? At least three things apply.

First, since we are here this morning at worship, we assume that we are those who love and serve him. This is devoutly to be hoped, but we need to examine our attitudes to see how true it is. Are we being faithful in our witness for him? Or is our sometimes-polite silence a façade for shabby neutrality? Is our occasional church attendance only a nod to social conformity?

A wife and her small son visited a church, so the pastor called in their home one evening that week. Only the husband, whom he had not met, was at home. They talked about church, and the man said he guessed he was a member somewhere “back home” but he wasn’t sure. Then he added, “My wife is the churchgoer in our family.” The pastor asked him as kindly as he could, “As far as Christianity is concerned, whose side are you on?” The man laughed and said, “I guess I’m not on anybody’s side, as you put it.” But he was! Not to decide is to decide.

How different from the totally-deaf man who went to church faithfully every Sunday. There was no interpretation in sign language, and he couldn’t hear a word that was said or sung. One day one of his “non-church” buddies wrote him a note asking why he went to church all the time when he couldn’t hear anything. The deaf man replied, “I don’t want there to be any doubt about which side I’m on.” Can there be any doubt as to which side you are on?

Secondly, we cannot force the Christian life on others, but if we are true to our witness for Jesus we can do our best to exhibit it and make it attractive to others. Our witness is not to condemn, but to invite— to tell in words and show in deeds what Jesus means to us; to tell and show with kindly conviction the strengthening power of our prayer and Bible study, and let the Holy Spirit use it as he will. A man came to church and asked for instruction as to how to become a member. He said, “A friend of mine has a joy and strength in his life that I sorely need in mine. He says he gets it here. I need the Lord that he has.” Are people attracted to Christ by what they see in us and hear from us?

And last, if we are true to our witness for Jesus, there will be opposition, just as there was to our Lord

Himself. We can expect it. No one is asking for our crucifixion, but there are those who will call us “goody-two-shoes” and ridicule our Christian faith. A jokingly contemptuous man once said to a pastor, “I use the same words on the golf course that you do in church, except in a different setting.” It was more that a different setting, of course- a different attitude, a different way of life, a different side of the division which Jesus described. The exclamation, “Jesus Christ!” can be either devotion or an epithet, but it can’t be both. Neutrality toward Jesus is impossible, even though people may try.

Jesus said, “Do you think I have come to give peace on earth? No. I tell you, but rather division.” When Abraham Lincoln was first introduced to Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin, he said, “So this is the little lady who started the ruckus we are in.” however true that incident may be, she wrote not to bring peace, but division and people had to decide where they stood.

There was a knight of Bethlehem, whose wealth was tears and sorrows.

His men at arms were little lambs, his trumpeters were sparrows.

His castle was a wooden cross, on which he hung so high.

His helmet was a crown of thorns, whose crest did touch the sky.

This is the man that brought the judgment of God upon the people. This is the man that divides families, communities and nations. The division he brought extends from his day to our day, and each person must decide which side he or she is on. There is no neutrality. “He who is not with me is against me.”

So it comes right down to this personal question: In the division over Jesus, which side are you on? My prayer for each of you is this: I pray that your witness, your way of life, your stewardship of your time and talents will answer that question with this answer. I am on the side of Jesus Christ, my Lord and my Savior.