

BIBLE READINGS: Hebrews 10:11-14 19-25 Mark 13:1-8

SERMON

Christopher Tyerman, in his history of the Crusades called "*God's War*", warns of the dangers of sentimentality and naivete about religion: "It is a fond myth of the religious that piety excludes greed, coercion, conformity and lack of reflection..." He is talking about the Crusades (1096-1272AD), when genocide, butchery, forced conversions and baptisms, were construed as works of God. The church not only justified and sanctified the Crusades, it even gave those who went on them and killed Muslims, remission for their sins and eternal salvation. Tyerman's warning is as applicable today as it was to medieval Europe. Even in Jesus' own day and among his closest followers religion could turn toxic.

At least four times in Mark 13 Jesus warns his followers: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and deceive many... You must be on your guard" (Mark 13:5–6, 9, 23, 33). These "false prophets and false Christs" would, if possible, deceive even his most intimate followers, said Jesus (Mark 13:22).

It wasn't even dangers from without but even among Jesus closest followers. Throughout the Gospels we read that his disciples argued about who among them was the greatest. They asked Jesus for seats of glory in paradise. They wanted to exterminate a Samaritan village that had shunned them. They tried to prevent children from coming to Jesus, objected to an anonymous healer who was not part of their inner circle, and in the garden of Gethsemane they defended him with the violence of the sword.

In the name of God's love Christians have slaughtered Muslims (the Crusades), Jews (the Holocaust), Native tribes (on every continent), and certainly each other (the Thirty Years War). We have humiliated and exploited slaves and women. People continue to seek to align the gospel with nationalistic and political ideologies of both the conservative right and the liberal left, all in the name of Jesus.

Christendom is just one of many religious offenders. Religious violence plays no favourites, either with perpetrators or victims. Child sacrifice, widow burning, caste systems, female genital mutilation, witch hunts, ritual abuse, ethnic cleansing, suicide bombers, apartheid, and mass suicides — the list is depressingly long and includes virtually every religion. Atheism as a religion is even worse. Under Stalin and Mao, 100 million people were exterminated in the last century.

Why do people do evil in the name of their religion? Why do we talk about love but torture and annihilate? After studying the Crusades all his life, Tyerman concludes that it's an "irreconcilable paradox" why medieval crusaders who followed the Prince of Peace endured unimaginable personal risks and privations in order to slaughter fellow human beings with such sincerity.

In his book *The Most Dangerous Animal*, David Livingstone Smith argues that violence is more a function of biology than religion. He says that war is deeply embedded in human nature, that it's innate, and our natural impulse. As such, war is not a pathology or aberrant choice but "a normal feature of human life."

None of these "explanations" mean that we can ignore, excuse, or rationalise religious violence. Far from it. We need to speak up when we see religious fraud. We need to name it for what it is. We can all learn and reflect upon some of the signs that religion has become evil and that evil has become religious. Here are ten warning bells.

- Fanatical claims of absolute truth. By this I mean the doubt-free and uncritical confidence that one has understood absolute truth absolutely.
- Identifying the gospel with nationalistic ideologies, political parties, state power, and ethnic identity.
- Blind obedience to totalitarian, charismatic, and authoritarian leaders, personality cults, or views that undermine moral integrity, personal freedom, individual responsibility, and intellectual inquiry.
- Helping to usher in the “end times” in the name of your religion.
- Justifying religious ends by dubious means.
- Any and all forms of dehumanization, from openly declaring war on your enemy, demonising those who differ from you, construing your neighbour as an Other, to claiming that God is on your side alone. Do you believe that God loves Muslims as much as Jews? There can't be the slightest hesitation or qualification in the answer — of course God does!
- Pressure tactics of coercion, deception, and false advertisement.
- Alienation, isolation and withdrawal from family, friends and society, whether psychologically or literally
- Exploitation and all forms of unreasonable demands upon one's time, money, resources, family, friendships, etc.
- Oddball, interpretations of Scripture that have little or no support from the broad, classical Christian tradition, or that disregard the best scholarship.

Don't be deceived, said Jesus. Watch out. Be on your guard against the many false faiths that masquerade as true religion.

So what marks our lives as followers of Christ? How are our lives different from those around us who have nothing to do with the church? The question is simply - how well are we doing? What would people learn about Christ by secretly observing our life? How clearly would people see the love of God in our lives if they followed us around from Monday through Friday? What does the regularity of our Sunday worship say to others? What does the amount our offering testify to? How well are we doing in giving witness to the Lordship of Christ and our Christian faith by the way we live?

Jesus' words - all this talk about the Second Coming of Christ or the Judgement Day, all the concern about the end of the world can really be boiled down to a single question - how well are we doing? How well do our lives give witness to what we believe? It's not a matter of salvation. That's secure for us. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Christ. It is no doing of our own. The question, rather is: how well are we doing in giving witness to that grace by the way we live?

Stay alert on the journey, Jesus says. Don't let anyone lead you astray. The Bible tells us "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The Final Judgement, the end of the world, holds no terror for us. For we have been saved by God's grace.

My prayer for us is that God would strengthen us so that in all that we say and all that we do, we may be faithful witnesses of God's love. Faithful to the end. In Jesus' name. Amen.