

[Luke 12:49-56](#)

On the [home page](#) of the British Methodist Church you can currently find these words displayed prominently:

God loves you unconditionally, no strings attached. That's the good news.

And I'd like to ask the author of those words whether they had read today's Gospel passage. Because the best we can say for such words is, they are a half-truth.

With a certain sense of alarm at certain trends in our church and elsewhere, I have mischievously entitled today's sermon 'Jesus In Love Divides Us.' And yes, that is a play on the report about sexuality that was called 'God In Love Unites Us' – a title that portrayed an utterly forlorn hope.

Fire on earth. Not peace but division, says Jesus here.

And perhaps the stark things Jesus says in our passage today are all the more shocking when you go back to the early chapters of Luke's Gospel. When he is born in Bethlehem, the angels proclaim peace. When Jesus preaches at Nazareth, he says he has good news for the poor.

Yet here is Jesus not so much preaching good news as bad news! What do we make of it?

Firstly, *Jesus is preparing his disciples for rejection.*

Don't misunderstand me, Jesus *is* good news. In his own Person he embodies God's Kingdom. He brings the forgiveness of sins. He gives value to people who are treated as worthless by society. He brings ultimate purpose to life. He conquers death. Even Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak haven't promised those things!

But – not everyone accepts that message, and not everyone likes it. We know the reaction of many leaders in society to Jesus when he was on earth. Was he popular with them? Largely, no. He was a threat to them. They plotted against him. They colluded to have him put on a Cross.

And Jesus warned his followers that similar things could and would happen to them. In this passage his 'baptism' may well be his baptism of suffering at the Cross. The division of families is because some will follow Jesus and others will not. Sometimes in church circles we make the family into an idol, but Jesus says following him is more important. It is not that we deliberately break up

families as some religious cults do, but it is to say that deciding about Jesus is an unavoidably divisive thing, and pain may come our way.

Now when we ask why people are rejecting Jesus, we sometimes get into the question of what is wrong with the church. And to some extent we should think about that. There can be things about us that give people a bad impression of Jesus, and we need to address them. I have said much about this in the past.

But we must also see that people reject Jesus because his ways are a challenge to their self-centred living. I was reading [a discussion](#) about a magazine article where twelve church leaders had been asked how we respond to continued church decline. Basically, all of them in their different ways berated the church for what was wrong with it.

But one person said this:

I don't think there is a problem with the church. The issue is with a self-righteous, materialistic society that has turned its back on God and is largely only interested in spirituality in a flesh-centred, personal-development sort of way. What we need to do is stay faithful to Christ through this difficult and challenging time.

I wouldn't say there's no problem with the church, but I would say let's be realistic about how much rejection of Christianity there is in our culture. People sometimes disguise it with high-handed moral words, but in a lot of cases, the reason people say no to Jesus is because they don't want to give up control of their lives to him. They are much happier in a me-centred world, but as we know, Jesus won't allow that.

Although we see heart-warming stories of kindness and love in our society too, we are generally surrounded by people whose major life decisions are about themselves and their personal happiness, rather than the serving and self-giving love of Jesus and his kingdom. So we should not be surprised when our Jesus message and our faith is rejected.

So if you have done all you can to be faithful but are still not seeing things turn for the better, then understand that at times in history the church goes through phases like this. It's a tough thing to say and it's far from an excuse to be casual. Because what we need to do is ask ourselves, are we being faithful

to Jesus and his teaching? If we are, then we are doing the right thing, and we leave the consequences to God.

Secondly, *Jesus is preaching a bigger Gospel.*

Let's go back to that slogan on the Methodist website:

God loves you unconditionally, no strings attached. That's the good news.

I said that at best it was a half-truth. What's right with it and what's wrong with it?

What's right with it is that God's love is offered to us without us deserving it, and before we ever made any attempt to love God ourselves. 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,' said Paul in Romans 5. God makes the first move in salvation. It all comes from him. Salvation is not of our making. It's not something we deserve or earn.

But what's wrong with the statement? Well, think about how Jesus himself proclaimed what the Gospel writers call the 'good news'. His good news message was 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.' There *is* good news that doesn't emanate from us or rely on us. The good news in first century terms is that God is on the throne, not Caesar. In our terms it is that God is on the throne, not Boris Johnson, Vladimir Putin, Joe Biden, or anyone else you care to name.

But because the only wise and compassionate God is on the throne of the universe, we need to make a response. Because God reigns over all, we need to respond by aligning our lives with his will. That's why Jesus said to the first disciples, 'Follow me.' Are you going to go my way, asks Jesus? We have a choice to make.

In our tradition, John Wesley started a movement that stressed how the Gospel was available to all people, and he welcomed enquirers. But he distinguished between those who were exploring the faith and those who were committed to Christ.

So when we sing hymns like '[Let Us Build A House](#)' where each verse ends with a rousing line, 'All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place,' we must remember that is true for people exploring the faith. But when it comes to responding to the welcoming love of God, there is a commitment to

be made that involves offering the whole of our lives. Anything less than that misrepresents the message of Jesus.

In all our talk of being inclusive, we must never lose sight of this challenge. It's the old adage that I've often quoted before: God love us just as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us as we are.

Thirdly and finally, *Jesus is warning about the implications of the Gospel.*

What is all that talk about interpreting the signs of the times? Why does Jesus say to the crowds they are good at weather forecasts but not at understanding the times in which they live?

Well, it's not the first time he's accused the crowds of just wanting a sign. Now, he says, there is a sign before you but you don't understand it. Yet you need to.

The sign they can't see or interpret is that of the divisions that Jesus brings. He is the real deal. He is all that he claimed to be. He is all that the religious leaders feared he was, and for which they hated him. It's no good thinking he's just another teacher. Nor is it enough to think he is a prophet.

In other words, as Hughie Green used to say all those years ago, it's make your mind up time. How we react to Jesus is critical. We cannot ignore him. We cannot patronise him by saying what a nice chap he was. We cannot say he was a great teacher – and then not follow his teaching. The sign that Jesus in love divides us points us to the fact that we must respond one way or the other to Jesus.

How do we respond positively to him? By turning from our selfish ways – and that's a lifelong task – and following him. That following him will involve so much more than an hour on Sunday. It will mean learning from him as his apprentices and putting what we learn into practice. It will mean self-denial rather than the self-fulfilment that the world (and some of the church!) preaches.

It takes all that we are and all that we have. Allying ourselves with Jesus is not a hobby or a consumer decision. It is life and death, nothing less.

And among those who do not share our willingness to say yes to Jesus will be those who will reject us, as we noted in the first point. We should not be surprised. Our enthusiasm to be inclusive must always be tempered by this.

So – back to where we began.

God loves you unconditionally, no strings attached. That's the good news.

Really? These words can never be a full statement of the good news. They might be the beginning, but we must never forget the challenge that Jesus brings and the cost it entails as we are divided into those who will follow him and those who will not.

And while we count the cost of discipleship, perhaps someone will have a word with the Methodist media team.