

nevertheless, are prepared to immerse themselves in the life of the church, voice its prayers and sing its praises, along with those more assured of their beliefs and commitments than themselves. And those for whom Jesus is significant, as explorers and disciples, however uncomfortable and challenging and unlike ourselves, they have a claim on our lives that we have no right to refuse.

The fact of Jesus divides all forms of social cohesion that serve our own comfort and self-satisfaction.

His gifts come in awkward packages. And the awkward and unfamiliar and different compel us to address the hiding places within our lives that we would most wish to ignore.

They offer us alternative ways of thinking and acting. They release us from our enclosed and narrow worlds. They contest the religious clichés we use that serve as a moratorium on our future growth. And they become bracing fellow travellers on our journey of discipleship.

It is a joy to be welcoming into the church today two new members committing themselves to give Jesus Christ pre-eminence in their lives, as we all did when we each gave our lives to Jesus Christ.

Dividing and realigning our family relations strengthens rather than undermines the relationships we most cherish. AMEN.

## **St Mary's Sanderstead & St James Riddlesdown**

**Sermon – 18.8.19 Fr. Peter Macan**

*Uncompromising words of Jesus from the Gospel for today:*

*'I have come to set fire to the earth . . . .*

*'Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No indeed, I have come to bring division.. . . . , family will be divided, father against son, son against father.. . . mother against daughter. . . '*

### **Jesus is talking about Reordering Relationships**

They didn't speak to her again, not her father, her mother, her sister or even the younger brother with whom she had been so close. When their eyes met, the family walked on the opposite side of the road. Cut off, considered as good as dead, the cost and consequence of declaring that she was now following Jesus Christ.

A scenario repeated in countless homes throughout the generations reaching back to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus himself.

### **Jesus is pre-eminent**

It happens to converts from other religions, too, but for Christians it is not beliefs and creeds and values, but the sheer towering, luminous, person of Jesus that

is the gravitational centre around which our most cherished, challenging and supportive relationships are realigned.

Jesus is not undermining the family, but neither is he lending support to the view that church and family are twin pillars of society. The family can consume us.

It has to be subordinate to him, otherwise it can be self-serving and even idolatrous. Jesus asks not merely to have a presence, or even a prominence in our lives, but to be pre-eminent.

Having divided the natural family, Jesus' challenge has implications for the re-branding of church as family.

We inherit our family; we expect to choose our church as we choose our washing powder or toothpaste, aided perhaps by *The Good Church Guide*. The church of choice is the one where we find those who think and speak like us. But - followers of Jesus are not meant to replace one exclusive set of relationships with another.

We are not meant to pick who we are standing with as we worship. It is a hand of cards that is randomly dealt to us; people who have nothing in common, whose paths would never, ever cross, except for one thing: **each one has an individual allegiance to Jesus Christ**. The result is that they pledge, as in a marriage covenant, to work out their relationship with Christ

with one another. And they renounce their right to walk away whenever they meet someone they don't like. As one recent convert said: 'You would never have caught me with this bunch of people a few months ago.'

### **Mabel**

Mabel is a woman with a heart as big as the ocean," with arms and mind to embrace all kinds of people. She throws a party, for no better reason than to celebrate being alive. A wide assortment of people turn up who would never normally be seen in one room together: sworn enemies and adversaries, casualties of personal feuds. Ian Paisley is there, as is Gerry Adams. Because of the mix, there is a high level of tension. But because Mabel is there, and because everyone respects and loves her, the guests are willing to engage with one another in a way that would be inconceivable without her. The mix of people can only come together around one person. Everything depends upon her presence.

That is a faint reflection of the way the figure of Jesus Christ works to draw all people to himself and to one another. Nothing holds us together except the shared significance of Jesus Christ.

That is likely to include people who have still not decided what significance Jesus has for them, but who,