

Reading: Luke 12:49-56

It's wonderful to be welcoming Olaf into the family of God this morning. I have done a little research and it turns out Olaf is the Patron Saint of Norway. He was their first king and once he converted to Christianity, he was no stranger to conflict.

Today the lectionary (the cycle of readings we use) talks about conflict. I was hoping for a reading about Jesus and the fluffy bunnies, not one about Jesus baptism of fire and about people in the same family turning against each other. Thanks lectionary!

To begin to make sense of this we need to remember the background of the first audience of Luke's Gospel. The Roman empire actively sought out Christians to persecute. A common way to discover Christians was to bribe members of a family to hand other members of the family over to the authorities. And Jesus is warning us, his followers, that there are seasons and times when it's going to be hard to be a Christian and that some resistance is hard to avoid. Sometimes the message that God loves us with an infinite unconditional love can be too much for people of ill will. For whatever reason, they want to shut it down, to wipe it out.

This was certainly the experience of Norway's saint and king, Olaf.

Many in our world today are actively persecuted for their faith. For eight decades of the twentieth century this was the case in Russia.

Schoolteachers would hold up a Bible and ask little kids if they had seen one of these at home. If they had a government official would visit the family. Vicars and church people were regularly imprisoned and never heard of again. The government required vicars to visit their offices once a week to report on new members and have the topics of their sermons approved.

This was the world in which Dmitri practised his faith. He lived with his family in a small village four hours from Moscow. The nearest church was a three day walk away, making it only possible to get to church twice a year.

So, Dmitri started a home church with his family. It started small enough, but a few neighbours got wind of it and soon the group grew to 25 people.

The officials took notice and demanded he stop but he didn't. Dmitri was sacked from his factory job and his wife from her teaching job and his sons expelled from school but still he continued.

When then home group got to 75 there wasn't enough room in the house. The villagers squeezed into every corner, even looking through the windows. One night a group of soldiers burst into the gathering and grabbed Dmitri, "You must stop!" they said and slapped him across the face.

He didn't stop. The next week 150 people came. Dmitri was arrested and sentenced to 17 years in prison.

His jail cell was so small he could take just one step to the wall. And he was the only Christian among 1500 others. They tortured him and the other prisoners mocked him, but he would stand arms outstretched singing hymns.

They kept telling him to recant his faith and on one occasion he almost did. The guards convinced him that his wife had been murdered and his children given to state care.

The thought of it was too much to bear. The guards told him the next day they would return with a form for him to sign to give up his faith.

That night over 1000 kilometres away his family prayed for him. In a dream Dmitri saw them gathered around praying for him. He felt they were safe.

The next morning came when the guards asked for his signature he said simply "I'm not signing anything."

The guards had had enough they dragged him to the place of execution. As they did 1500 criminals all raised their hands and began to sing the hymn Dmitri had sang each morning. "Who are you?" they asked him in desperation. "I am," he said, "a child of the living God." They could break neither his spirit nor his faith, so they simply let him go.

You may never, thank God, find yourself in Russian prison but we all can find times when being a Christian is difficult. It might be conflict with a boss or even a spouse.

Remember Jesus' words that tell us this is only a season. And remember Dmitri for, like him, we are all through our baptism children of the living God and this is God's promise to us that he will never leave us or forsake us.

This is God's promise to Olaf today, and to us all.