

What a mixed up world it has become to be.

I'd like to tell you a tale of two families.

The first family is that of Nasser Muthana. You may well have heard of him, because, this week, he was identified as one of three British Muslims on a video recruiting young men to join Isis – the harsher than Al-Qaeda jihadist army currently fighting in Iraq and Syria.

His parents are completely horrified that Muthana – and his younger brother – have gone to fight. Reportedly, his mother has had a nervous breakdown since finding out, shocked that they would join such a cause. It's horrible, and alarming and you can't help but pray for them all – for young men being caught up in a cruel and ruthless ideology, for relations in a state of desperation over the things their children are believing in the name of religion, and for all those caught up in the resulting warfare.

Part of the message on the video said to potential recruits to Isis, 'Are you willing to sacrifice the fat job you've got? The big car you've got? The family you have? Are you willing to sacrifice this for the sake of Allah? Definitely if you sacrifice for Alla, Allah will give you 700 times more than this. The cure for depression is jihad. Feel the honour we are feeling, feel the happiness we are feeling.'

In the light of this story, what are we to make of the words of Jesus from today's Gospel reading? Taken from his instructions to the twelve before sending them out on their mission trip, this is particularly tough talking. 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...' Jesus then lists how family members will be set at odds. 'Whoever loves father or mother (or son or daughter) more than me is not worthy of me... whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.'

Is not all this also about extremism – the sort of thing that frightens us with its intensity and costliness, the sort of thing that from another time, another place, and another faith, sounds all too like the words from the video? Is it not indicative of the kind of hard line religion – even in Christianity – that brings out the violence in people?

Well, I wonder.

Of course, the first thing we MUST say is that extreme Islam is only one part of Islam – and is as roundly condemned by the mainstream Muslim community in this country as by other sections of the population.

And while the words of Jesus certainly suggest that to be his follower can be a dangerous thing, requiring a very high level of commitment and determination to put God before everything, there ends the comparison with Isis or with any other fundamentalist militia, whatever its ideology. Because what Jesus calls his people to is a way of radical love – turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, washing feet, healing the sick, proclaiming the kingdom, serving the poor, praying for your enemy.

This is not about imposing religious law with weapons of war – though Christians too have been guilty of that. This is about waging a war of love – the radical, sacrificial love that changes the world, one person at a time.

This is also not a reading about rejecting family – but about putting priorities straight. God first. Love your parents, your children, your friends, but put your love of God first. Keep things in the right, godly perspective. As Jesus did. And be aware that the world, which often loves the way of condemnation and conflict, will not always understand. And that might be costly – as it was for Jesus.

So, now to our second family.

Muthoni – not that dissimilar a name to Muthana – is a friend of ours. She's a Kenyan Christian. We got to know her in inner city London when she came to work in a Christian preschool centre in a converted old pub. She came for one year, and ended up doing two. She was much loved, had huge amounts to contribute, and made lasting friendships.

We saw her again a number of times. She visited us a couple of times when back in the UK doing an MA in development studies. She ended up back in Africa working for an aid agency in Sudan, then later in Somalia. We kept in touch when we could, and some members of the family saw her on trips to Kenya.

However, 23 months ago, Muthoni – follower of Jesus, serving the poorest of the poor, living a life of love, was captured, with two other aid workers, by Somali pirates. The police officers providing security were overpowered, one aid worker shot and left for dead (though did actually recover) and the other three taken hostage – one woman, two men.

Someone we knew. Someone we loved.

And, with others around the world, we have prayed – and prayed and prayed – and tried to imagine what it must all have been like for her – for the three of them.

Much work has gone on behind the scenes.

Two weeks ago – sat up in bed checking emails – the news came through – they were free. How do you take in news like that? We had no idea... but seeing the film of their arrival home has helped. And now we continue to pray – because how do you begin to recover from all that? We pray for healing and restoration, and that the faith that sustained Muthoni in captivity will sustain her now in recovery.

It can be costly following Jesus. Costly for individuals. Costly for families. However, whilst Muthoni's family suffered dreadfully during her captivity – they never needed to be ashamed of the calling on her life. Not like Nasser Muthana's parents.

Jesus' words in this gospel passage are hard, I believe, because life, for many, many people on earth is very, very hard.

However, even in this short passage, there are words that give us confidence and comfort, boldness and strength.

You are of more value than many sparrows – and God sees every sparrow that falls. The hairs on your head are numbered – a number that changes daily. Today it might say, the cells in your body are numbered. God knows you that intimately. Do not be afraid – you are so, so valuable. In this

country, the cost of following Jesus, in this era, may well be high, but it does not threaten our lives. But we can still be afraid, afraid of ridicule, afraid of owning our faith to others. Our challenge is to stay so close to God that we allow his love to set us free from fear, day by day, step by step: to follow Jesus, to love God with heart and mind and soul and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And, of course, we cannot do it. Only the Holy Spirit, working within us, can help us take up our cross and follow.

Will we offer our lives, our daily, ordinary, up and down sort of lives, back to the God who loves us endlessly and completely, so that he can help us to be people who have our priorities straight and who will live the radical way of love?

Will Beverly Minster become known, more than it already is, more and more and more, as a place where the radical, self-giving love of Jesus is lived out – a place filled increasingly with the love of God – where the poor and dispossessed find hope, where the depressed find new life in Jesus, where those hungry for meaning find the kingdom of God?

Will we commit ourselves afresh to this way of life?

Like Muthoni and her family?