



Revd Ro's Reflection on Third Sunday after Trinity

Proper 7

Year A

Matthew 10.24-39

Romans 6.1b-11

I remember hearing the prayer 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild,' as a child in school. Even then I thought it was misguided. I could see that it was referring to Jesus' love and compassion but it fell very wide of the Jesus who called the Pharisees 'whited sepulchres' or who threw the money changers out of the temple. Jesus came to bring in the new way of God and to stand against evil in all its forms. It wasn't being meek and mild that took him to the cross. Well here in our gospel passage we have some tough comments from Jesus. If we simply hear them read they can seem mystifying. I remember that, as a youngster, the bit about loving father and mother made me feel uncomfortable. However, as is often the case, closer inspection reveals the real meaning, maybe unnoticed before.

It is good to examine this passage in the light of the gospel readings we have been looking at over the past weeks and Jesus' words to his disciples about God's love for them and the Holy Spirit being with them. As we saw last week our readings show Jesus' mission and ministry. He has power over the elements as he stills the storm, power to heal and power over death itself as he raises the daughter of the leader of the synagogue. This passage continues from last week's as Jesus prepares to send his disciples out on mission. But he sends them out with his authority and in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. They will do great things in his name!

He wants them to be under no illusions as to the dangers they may face. Jesus is referring back to the fact that the Pharisees accuse him of banishing demons because he uses demonic power. That accusation is so ridiculous that Jesus doesn't even answer it at the time. However it shows the extent of the opposition growing among the ruling sects. Jealousy and fear are a potent mixture and almost always lead to destruction. That is why he says if they say I am in league with evil they will say the same of you as an excuse to persecute you! As he says,

²⁴ 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his house hold!' (Matthew 10)

Right at the beginning of the passage it is made clear to the disciples that they are to take Jesus as their pattern, Jesus who taught God's way and who was the master who came to serve. If anyone is against him they will be against his followers too.

'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves;' (Matthew 10.16)

Jesus always told the truth, he never pretended life would be easy for them any more than it would be for him, but, and it is a big but, Jesus says, as he has said so often, 'Do not be afraid.' God is with you, you are not acting in your own strength but in the strength of God and his Holy Spirit.

I suppose the instruction, verse 27, leads to a saying which is still common today, 'Shout it from the rooftops.' That takes us right back to Pentecost when the disciples rushed out and proclaimed God's message to a potentially hostile crowd.

Jesus says that people may persecute you for following me, for acting in my name but be sure nothing that a person does will be done in secret. Why? Because God sees into a person's heart, he sees their behaviour and knows the truth. That is the nature of God. One of my favourite bits of John's gospel is, 'The truth will set you free.' (John 8.32)

The next verse, 28, 'fear those who can destroy body and soul' is a difficult one. Jesus is not talking about God here. The love of God has been made clear to his followers over and over and here Jesus gives the analogy of the sparrows. They were pretty worthless, but not to God, the creator of everything. How much more so are we, his children? He knows us intimately, everything about us and loves us more deeply than we can ever conceive. 'Even the hairs of your head are counted.' This truth echoes throughout the bible, Isaiah 43, being just one example, 'Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you. Called you by name, you are mine.' These are words from Night Prayer, 'Keep me as the apple of your eye, and hide me under the shadow of your wings.'

Jesus' message is this. People may persecute you, they might hurt the body, even make life very uncomfortable for you, but they can't hurt your soul, that is God's. However, never forsake God and give your soul away by turning your back on him. Judas did that but it was his decision to do so, no one forced him to. He chose to turn his back on God. Incidentally that's the definition of despair. So if you turn to evil and turn to people who are evil then you will lose yourself.

We have made the decision to follow Jesus. But, and this is his next point, if you do follow Jesus do not expect it to be easy. Jesus says, 'Do not think I have come to bring peace to the world,' continuing from verse 34 onwards, when Jesus is talking about turning one against another, we need to link this back to his warning to the disciples in chapter 10.

²¹ 'Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ²² and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.'

Jesus is not talking about making trouble, he is simply being honest. If you follow me you will meet with opposition, sometimes violent opposition, possibly even from those closest to you. This truth of course is not just for the disciples, not just for the early church but it echoes down the ages and in some places is still true today.

³⁴ 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father,

and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household.'

Looking at it more deeply still, it is not just Christians persecuted by other faiths but sectarian violence in the name of religion!

Jesus has brought the truth of God; he has brought the love of God. However the corollary of this is that people will oppose Jesus and his followers will suffer as a consequence of the opposition.

The passage, 'Whoever loves Father and mother more than me,' has to be seen in this context. He doesn't mean we all have to leave families and be contemplatives or go on mission, though many have done just that, or that we shouldn't love our families dearly, of course we should, that is a reflection of God's love for us, his children. He means get your priorities right. Jesus means that we must live out his way of love in our everyday lives. We need to be single minded in our following of Jesus and try to put him and his way of love at the heart of all we do.

He is saying stand up for me wherever you are and never be afraid to speak out for me and to act in God's way, even in the face of persecution or opposition, opposition which might come from those closest to you. Love God and act as Jesus taught is the number one priority. To act in the Christian way is often not the way which is expedient, or the way that is acceptable to the world. Jesus tells it like it is, 'Take up your cross and follow me.' But we have this promise; don't be afraid, you are never alone. Always remember this says Jesus,

⁴⁰ 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'

Jesus will walk the way of the cross in love; he will face the ultimate persecution and taste the worst that evil can do. But on the cross he defeated evil, at his resurrection he defeated death and won eternal life for all who turn to him.

The poet Robert Frost wrote,
'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.'

That is really what Jesus is saying. You must be followers of my way; 'The Way.' That will make all the difference to our lives and the people we meet. And Jesus ends with the promise that we will have eternal life with him if we follow his way.

Or as St. Paul puts it in today's reading,

'We will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.'

In the letter from St. Paul he begins by making a central point.

^{6.1} 'What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?'

The grace of God is freely given to humanity in the covenant God made with us in Jesus Christ. All God's promises won through Jesus are freely given. A covenant however is not a one way thing it is mutual. There are promises on each side. On our side we promise to turn from sin and turn to Christ and live in his way. If we become a Christian then the old way of life should be dead to us.

³ 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.'

Baptism is a central sacrament, 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.' Jesus as Messiah stands for all his people and as God saved his peoples the Jews from slavery in Egypt; he has saved humanity in Jesus. By baptism we become, 'ordained into the priesthood of God's holy people.' Think of the baptism service, based on the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. The water of baptism represents dying to sin and rising to new life with Christ, the symbolism is so clear if the candidate is immersed completely in the water and rises to new life in Christ washed clean of sin. Not only that but by baptism we receive all that Christ won for us through God's grace We rise to new life, eternal life with him.

⁵ 'For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.'

Jesus Christ died, he was raised from the dead, he is alive forever more and we will be united with him. We will one day be citizens in God's newly created order. Jesus the co-creator is King of the cosmos and the new creation will be of all that is. So, says Paul, all this is true for you as new members of the body of Christ; you are one with him so sin is behind and you must never go back to it. You are a new creation, alive with Christ and dead to sin. Put the old way behind and live in the way Christ taught.

⁹ 'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.'

This is the wonderful promise of God but to gain eternal life with him you must live in Christ's way, become 'Followers of the Way, not in speech only but in deed, in all you do.

At a baptism service it is so important that people understand that it is not a naming ceremony it is the making of a new Christian. That the Holy Spirit is present and that the person is washed clean of sin and begins their new life with Christ. Paul needs the Romans to understand you can't get baptised into Christ and go back to your old ways. They were put to death with him. You are a new creation and must go forward in the way of Christ. Then you will receive God's grace and the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection.

'I am a new creation, no more in condemnation, here in the grace of God I stand.' Dave Bilbrough

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