**REFLECTION 13: OPPOSITION AND PERSECUTION**

**Matthew 10: 24-39**

**The Gospel Reading**

*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 household!*

*26 ‘So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. 30And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

*32 ‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; 33but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.*

*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.
37Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

**The Reflection**

I once began a discussion group by asking what they thought to be the most important characteristic of being a Christian. Back came the answer: to be *nice* to everybody. So you can imagine the ripple of surprise when I replied that if that were true, Jesus himself could never have qualified as a Christian!

What we see in Matthew chapter 10 is not the Jesus of popular imagination – gentle, meek, mild and nice – but Jesus the provocative disruptor who declares that he has “not come to bring peace but a sword.” Not to unite families but to divide them. This is truly shocking to our ears. What can he possibly mean?

The key lies in appreciating that this chapter is what we might call a “hinge” chapter. Go back to last week’s reading and we find Jesus sending the Apostles out to declare the Good News of God’s kingdom. But no sooner has he done so than the hinge pivots and we find him speaking to them about the opposition they will encounter in very un-nice terms. “See”, he says, “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves…and you will be hated by all because of my name.” (chapter 10, verses 16 & 22)

The ministry of the Apostles, in other words, was to involve opposition and persecution, just as the ministry of their Master involved the same. If the Apostles had previously thought any different, Jesus was now giving them a reality check.

We usually think of the Roman Emperor Nero when we speak of the persecution of Christians. But to associate persecution only with ancient times would be a mistake, for many Christians today can testify to the truth of Jesus’ words. At present, the International Society for Human Rights estimates that, worldwide, Christians are believed to be targets of about 80% of all acts of religious discrimination or persecution. And even more shockingly, an independent report commissioned by the UK government last year spoke of persecution of Christians in some parts of the world as “coming close to meeting the international definition of genocide.”

**Opposition**

It may seem strange, then, that in Matthew chapter 10 within the space of only five verses (26-31) Jesus three times tells the Apostles “Do not be afraid.” Here is Jesus warning the twelve of persecution to come, yet at one and same time exhorting them not to be fearful. The Apostles must surely have wondered what they were supposed to make of all this.

It’s important to realise that Jesus now is preparing the twelve for the harsh times that lie ahead. Their opponents will seek to destroy their credibility in all kinds of ways – by accusing them of false teaching, by questioning their integrity, by claiming even that they are agents of Satan. These enemies will stop at nothing, including death. Apostleship, Jesus is saying, is not to be seen as a ticket to an easy life. Exactly the opposite, in fact.

It’s in this light that we must read Jesus’ encouragement not to be afraid. He wants them to know that they must remain firm in their allegiance to God. And although this might lead to persecution and even to death, they can draw courage from the fact that their enemies may be able to destroy the body but cannot destroy the soul. For those who persevere in faith, he promises that God will honour them. “Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven.” (verse 32 - but read on to verse 33).

 Jesus thus seeks to reassure them that when they come to experience persecution, as they surely will, God will not abandon them. For if God values two lowly sparrows (the cheapest of all birds), how much more will he value those who remain faithful to Christ. They will not escape persecution; but when confronted by it, they will find courage and strength in God to endure in faith, even to death.

**Humbling**

To us, these words may seem just that – words. For we, thankfully, don’t experience persecution. But think of the millions of believers in other places around the globe for whom the threat of violence or death is a daily occurrence. To them, Jesus’ words of assurance offer hope and strength that their holding fast to God despite all that might happen to them will be honoured by him. This surely humbles us. At the very least, it should stir us to pray for them.

But how does understanding Jesus’ challenge to the Apostles help us with knowing what it means to be a Christian? We can see straight away that niceness isn’t the measure that Jesus is interested in. Rather, it is faithfulness and perseverance despite the odds that must define us, whether we are under persecution or merely faced with the sort of indifference that is common today. Of course, this is not a licence to be unpleasant towards others, but we should not mistake niceness as the characteristic that marks us out as followers of Christ.

And so we are brought back to those enigmatic and disturbing words of Jesus about his not bringing peace but a sword and his coming to divide families. When we read them, our first instinct is to be shocked and to avoid grappling with them. But rather than ignore them, we need to see them in the light of Jesus’ prior warnings about the reality of persecution. Jesus is using highly dramatic language to make clear that serving him will bring opposition, even from family and friends. Once we realise this, we can see that he is not setting out to bring division but rather that it will inevitably arise. And when it does so, we must not be surprised. If we were to paraphrase his teaching in this passage, it might run something like this:

“Look, don’t suppose that just because you are being sent out as my messengers, life will be easy. It won’t. You’ll face opposition from the powers-that-be, sometimes fatally. At that moment, you will be tempted to renounce your allegiance to me and to God’s kingdom. That’s when you will be at greatest spiritual risk of cutting yourselves off from God, not just temporarily but for all time. But hold fast and you’ll find that your heavenly Father who loves you above all other parts of his creation will honour you. You may still know rejection, even death. But be assured that God will hold you close through everything, come what may.

There’s only one way to be faithful, then, and that is to make God’s kingdom your absolute priority. This will be hard, for it may cause divisions within your family and friends who cannot accept the Good News of the kingdom. They may even turn against you and betray you. But however awful that may be, remember God will be with you. And remember, too, that you will be following in exactly the same steps as his Son. Count this as a privilege.

And by the way, don’t forget the sparrows – God hasn’t.”

**Francis Bridger**

**An Interesting Quotation about Today’s Gospel Passage**

“True discipleship is the art of seeking the kingdom with single-minded determination and letting the chips fall where they may. The church that always manages to glide through life without rubbing anyone the wrong way may have reason to question whether it is truly *this* Jesus it honours as Master and Lord.” (Lance Pape, theologian)

**Other Readings for the Third Sunday of Pentecost**

**Jeremiah 20: 7-13**

*7 O Lord, you have enticed me,
   and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me,
   and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughing-stock all day long;
   everyone mocks me.
8 For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
   I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’
For the word of the Lord has become for me
   a reproach and derision all day long.
9 If I say, ‘I will not mention him,
   or speak any more in his name’,
then within me there is something like a burning fire
   shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
   and I cannot.
10 For I hear many whispering:
   ‘Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!’
   All my close friends
   are watching for me to stumble.
‘Perhaps he can be enticed,
   and we can prevail against him,
   and take our revenge on him.’
11 But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;
   therefore my persecutors will stumble,
   and they will not prevail.
They will be greatly shamed,
   for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonour
   will never be forgotten.
12 O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,
   you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them,
   for to you I have committed my cause.*

 *13 Sing to the Lord;
   praise the Lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
   from the hands of evildoers.*

**Romans 6: 1-11**

*6What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? 2By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? 3Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4Therefore 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.*

*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. 7For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9We 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. 11So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*