

Third Sunday after Pentecost

21st June 2020

The Rev'd Colleen Clayton

Text;

Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴ ‘A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵ it 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!

Whom to Fear

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. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So 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; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Not Peace, but a Sword

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.

³⁷ Whoever 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; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

I would like to read you some excerpts from a sermon preached by the Rev'd Dr Martin Luther King Jnr.

Our sermon today brings us face to face with one of the most agonizing problems of human experience. Very few, if any, of us are able to see all of our hopes fulfilled. So many of the hopes and promises of our mortal days are unrealized. Each of us, like Schubert, begins composing a symphony that is never finished.

If we turn back to the life of the Apostle Paul, we find a very potent example of this problem of disappointed hopes. In his letter to the Christians at Rome Paul wrote: "When I take my journey into Spain, I will come unto you." It was one of Paul's greatest hopes to go to Spain, the edge of the then known world, where he could further spread the Christian gospel. And on his way to Spain, he planned to visit that valiant group of Christians in Rome, the capital city of the world.

But notice what happened to this noble dream and this glowing hope that gripped Paul's life. He never got to Rome in the sense that he had hoped. He went there only as a prisoner and not as a free man. He spent his days in that ancient city in a little prison cell, held captive because of his daring faith in Jesus Christ. Neither was Paul able to walk the dusty roads of Spain, nor see its curvaceous slopes, nor watch its busy coast life, because he died a martyr's death in Rome. The story of Paul's life was the tragic story of a shattered dream and a blasted hope.

Wanting Spain and getting a narrow cell in a Roman prison, how familiar an experience that is! But to take the Roman prison, the broken, the left-over of a disappointed expectation, and make of it an opportunity to serve God's purpose, how much less familiar that is! Yet, powerful living has always involved such a victory over one's own soul and one's situation.

Of course, some of us will die having not received the promise of freedom. But we must continue to move on. On the one hand we must accept the finite disappointment, but in spite of this we must maintain the infinite hope. This is the only way that we will be able to live without the fatigue of bitterness and the drain of resentment.¹

These words of Dr King's could have been written as a reflection on today's Gospel reading. In this passage, Matthew names the present fear and danger facing the disciples. Their lives are threatened by those who oppose Jesus and all that he stands for. The Gospel contains words of comfort, *even the hairs of your head are all counted; you are of more value than many sparrows (10:30,31)*, but also words of harsh reality, *do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword (10:34)*.

¹ These excerpts are taken from the draft of Chapter X of "Shattered Dreams". For the full text see; <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/publications/papers-martin-luther-king-jr-volume-vi-advocate-social-gospel-september-1948-%E2%80%93-march>

There are no promises that those who follow Jesus won't get hurt, but three times they are told, *don't fear* (10:26, 28, 31). Don't fear that those with the power to do harm are going to reign triumphant in the end. Have confidence in God whose life-giving love will have the final word.

It is a confronting reading. The disciples are called to have confidence in God, even as they are told that they cannot have confidence that they personally will be ok. It was this kind of call to courageous living, to a commitment to truth that risks everything, which shaped the life of Martin Luther King and which led to his assassination. Tragically, as we have seen over and over again in the US, but also here in Australia, racism and hatred continues to claim individual lives and we continue to pray for justice and to trust in the promise that it is God's love that will endure.

In considering the words of the Gospel and the words of Dr King, something that strikes me is the way that they both name things that cause struggle and fear, as well as the way that each calls us to live with hope and courage in the midst of the things that make us afraid.

Simply naming the things of which we are afraid is a way of combating fear. Once something is called out, named, it is contained to a certain extent. Naming a fear defines it, sets limits around it, and allows us to see that however frightening it is, it is not infinite. Jesus says, *do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul* (10:28). God's love is infinite and eternal. No fear can even begin to approach it in magnitude.

In Australia today, we do not experience persecution for being followers of Jesus. We are less likely to have reason to be afraid to confess our faith and more to simply feel embarrassed by it, or to find ourselves unable to explain our reasons for belief. *If we never experience discomfort and embarrassment in living the faith, if we never have to "confess Jesus" in a way that means standing apart from the crowd, have we truly heard the good news for which at our baptism we were claimed?*²

Knowing the love of God has enabled many people over the years to behave with courage even though they were afraid. God's love is strong. It is also challenging and demanding. It confronts the things which keep people imprisoned and it challenges structures of evil and oppression. Jesus says, *do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword* (10:34). These are not words of violence, but they are words about the separation between the ways of life and death.

In this passage, the sword is the symbol of division. Jesus' words are not words of violence, but they are words about the separation that must occur between the ways of life and of death. Each of us at different times will have to choose whether to acknowledge or deny Jesus. This may happen in a dramatic way where it is clear that a life defining choice must be made, or it may happen in a thousand small ways where each individual decision seems unimportant but where, over time, those little choices form the shape and pattern of a life.

²Taken from Brendan Byrne's commentary, "Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today", p89.

The Gospel tells us that the sword he brings can sometimes mean separation even between those with whom we think we share the closest of ties, family, friends, church community. This separation does not give permission for destructive anger and hatred towards others, it is simply an acknowledgement that we are called to shape our lives by our relationship with Jesus, not with anyone else. Jesus is our Lord and Saviour, not our parents, our partners or our children.

Jesus brings a sword of discernment and choice. The Empire wields a sword in order to kill and destroy, to oppress and control through fear. When lives are lived in a safety bought by violence and oppression, those lives are lost. By contrast, Jesus tells us that, free and powerful lives are gained when we live by trusting God, by being unafraid and by taking up the cross.

The sword of which Jesus speaks, cuts a line between those who will take up their cross and those who will not. To take up the cross is not about putting up with trivial burdens or small hardships. We are called to take up the totality of the cross; its pain, shame, social rejection, violence, humiliation. What's at stake in following Jesus is the division between the destructive power of the Empire and the creative power of God. The cross is the dividing line between the two, between life and death.

Jesus challenged the Empire directly by his peaceful refusal to be bound by its structures of power. He also challenged it indirectly by valuing and redefining those that the Empire was willing to destroy. Today, Jesus calls the church, his body on earth, to take up the cross by being unafraid to peacefully challenge the power of today's Empire. He calls us to stand alongside the marginalised and the vulnerable, asserting their intrinsic value and telling those who seek to hurt and destroy, that they are loved by the One who numbers every hair on every head and who counts every sparrow that falls.

Amen.