#  Jeremiah 20.7-13Matthew 10.24-39

**25th June 2023**

##  Be not afraid

Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.

Introduction to the Theme

In our Gospel reading, in just a few moments time, we’ll hear Jesus says: *Do not fear those who will kill the body, but cannot kill the soul.*This is another example of one of Matthew’s core ideas in his gospel, that Christians are to live like Jesus, and in doing so will often find themselves swimming against the tide.

Matthew writes long before Constantine embraced Christianity. In AD 85, the date when we think this gospel was written, about 15 years after Mark and 15 years before Luke, Domitian was the Roman emperor. He was the last of the Flavian family to rule the empire with both his father and brother sitting on the throne before him.

Domitian was, in the view of modern historians a *ruthless but efficient* ruler. And maybe that could be said of many totalitarian dictators. Their ruthlessness is tolerated because they made the trains run on time!

The Senate hated Domitian because he clipped their wings, indeed ten years after Matthew’s gospel was written he was assassinated by some senate officials, and on his death the members passed a motion *condemning his memory to oblivion.*Domitian sent an army to invade Scotland – strange in a way for us to contextualise the gospel of Matthew and remember it was being written at the same time that Scotland was being invaded by Roman soldiers.

Yet, perhaps most importantly for Matthew’s readership, Domitian was keen on the idea that Emperors were godlike, he even deified his brother and predecessor, Titus.

So, it was against this background that Matthew paints a picture of Jesus speaking about the threat of persecution. And especially the call of Jesus to his disciples to stand firm and be prepared to swim against the tide.

So, in our sermon together this morning we’ll explore further what Jesus says about living our lives with conviction and not being ashamed to be counter cultural in our morals and expressions of faith.

Jesus, who ends up dying for his convictions, says to us *Hold onto yours and do not be afraid.*

SERMON

Jesus was only too well aware of conflict. He was born into it and it stayed with him at every turn.

He seems to have experienced it at various levels, and perhaps none was more piercing than that with his family and home community of Nazareth. After preaching at the local synagogue he’s forced out of town, and then whilst out and about on mission his family send a delegation seeking to bring him home because they thought him mad.

When those nearest and dearest to us start doubting our integrity, the world becomes a shaky sort of place as our security goes.

As his public ministry progresses Jesus comes into conflict with the Romans. Officials, probably petrified at any whiff of a slave uprising, clamp down indiscriminately on anyone who seems to be drawing a crowd. And Pilate’s notice, fixed to the cross, *This is Jesus, King of the Jews,* spoke volumes about the Governor’s fear at anyone accepting the title of Lord and thereby seemingly usurping the status and authority of Caesar.

And all of this was compounded for Jesus by his conflict with the religious leaders of Israel. They too viewed this wondering preacher with suspicion and treated him as a threat to their own authority.

For Jesus the conflict did nothing but escalate, until it boiled over in Holy Week and as civic and religious leaders blended their frustrations towards him, a cross becomes the means by which this Jesus, who met people at the margins, this Jesus who questioned the lack of compassion shown by the powerful, was silenced.

Yet, in the face of such conflict today’s passage has but one message: *Be not afraid.*

The passage says that God, who knows when a sparrow falls, the God who can count the number of hairs on our head, this God will be alongside us whenever we go through suffering caused by an integrity that produces conflict.

However, these words need to be remembered for what they actually say, rather than for us misremembering them for what we think they ought to say.

What they don’t say is: *Be not afraid because my divine protection will shield you from all conflict and any suffering.* Because that is a prevalent type of Christianity that sounds true but is intensely unbiblical.

Instead, these words of Jesus, given to us by Matthew encourage us to be unafraid because God walks in solidarity alongside us when we suffer. The sparrow might still fall to the ground and the hair on our heads turns thin, yet we can be assured that God shares our pain and will help carry our sorrows.

Now, this morning I’m intrigued by the reference in our reading to Beelzebub.

In contradiction to the nursery rhyme that says: *Sticks and stones may break our bones but names will never hurt us…* Jesus seems to be acutely aware of the power of name calling.

Some of his opponents expressed their conflict towards him by accusing him of being diabolical – of having a Satanic power. Jesus, they said, didn’t heal in the name of a God of love but through the power of Beelzebub. In other words, they demonised him. And we’ve been doing it to each other ever since.

One of the cheapest ways of bringing anyone down is to misappropriate their intentions or actions.

I was a student in London during South Africa’s years of apartheid. Every time I walked around Trafalgar Square there would be a crowd outside South Africa House calling for the release of Nelson Mandela, someone who had been demonised for years as a terrorist and enemy of the State.

Eventually, upon his release in 1990, he emerged into the sunshine after 27 years in jail for his terrorist and seditious views. What we saw looked anything but a terrorist, he appeared as a kindly, softly spoken, smiling man, dressed in a suit – a President in waiting now ready to lead a rainbow nation into a more equitable future, and the world rejoiced.

However loving his words, however kind his actions, Jesus was demonised by many around him and he was called Beelzebub.

Now, there is a great need as we read today’s passage that we understand a way of preaching in Matthew’s day called Hyperbole. It was a common technique of over egging part of your sermon or talk for dramatic effect. Words that were never meant to be taken literally but were there to make a strong point.

For example, in our gospel reading today Jesus talks of conflict with the idea that he didn’t come to the world to bring peace but a sword. Really? Ouch!

Now, if you just read that verse literally without any concept of the technique of hyperbole it could lead you into all sorts of actions which would be the exact opposite of basic Christian truths.

Because, after all, didn’t the angels sing at Jesus’ birth *Peace on earth and goodwill to all.* So, I don’t think Jesus is looking for a fight. Instead, he is saying here that the Kingdom values he’s teaching will bring division, they might even cut through families.

Because it wouldn’t have been easy for the authorities to reintegrate back into the centre, those people with a dreaded skin disease who lived on the margins, and it remained the case that it was easy to cast the first stone and rush to judgment about a neighbour.

When Jesus challenged the way society was organised and advocated that it might be more honouring to God and loving towards neighbour to view it from the bottom rather than the top – many fell out with him, plotted against him and eventually crucified him.

Yet again and again we encounter a Jesus who wanted to keep the dialogue going. He tried all sorts of ways to engage with all sorts of people: stories for the crowd in the form of parables, meals with theologically in depth conversation around the tables in the homes of pharisees, one to one encounters at a well, and even a dialogue with a Sino Phoenician women in which he seems to change his mind because of her challenge.

I sense that the Jesus of the gospels knew the power of words. We have records of one encounter after another and surely that inspires us to value the power of words over the futility of weapons.

There is such a need in society today for us to value dialogue and encounter and to practice it with sustained patience and dogged perseverance.

It's tragic when people are cancelled on social media, bared from the Edinburgh Festival, or heckled at the Oxford Union simply because they have a different viewpoint. Theirs is not hate speech, which justifiably shouldn’t be granted a platform, but just an alternate view.

A fortnight ago Aleem Magbool, the BBC religious Affairs correspondent interviewed the one-time SNP leadership candidate, Kate Forbes. She came second and was reflecting on how much in the campaign was said about her, briefed against her, because of her membership of the Free Church of Scotland.

Now, I suspect, that Kate Forbes and I, both of us I think sincere Christians, yet we have a different understanding of scripture. However, I hope I recognise her sincerity and wouldn’t ‘cancel’ her. Rather, I’d want to dig deeper, hear what she has to say and engage with her in dialogue. And yet she said in this interview: *I do think there is a fear which characterises right now any discussions about faith. People of faith feel like they have to hide their faith or adapt it, and that is a cause for concern.*I thank God for folks who try to make a connection between faith and their everyday lives and are bold enough to engage in dialogue outside the church and in society. To such people, who will definitely encounter significant conflict maybe Jesus would still say today: *Be not afraid.*Don’t be afraid you folks at St Paul’s Cathedral as you hold seminars and conferences with bankers and investors from the City of London, as you do regularly, addressing ethics and finance.

Don’t be afraid you staff members at the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity as you seek to provide bridges for people to relate their Sunday faith to their workaday faith.

Don’t be afraid you church leaders when you attend the Party Conferences each autumn and mingle in the foyer with delegates seeking to have meaningful encounters with today’s politicians and activists.

Conflict, hopefully just verbal, may be inevitable in each of these settings, yet Jesus led the way, never shying away from challenging the status quo in the name of those godly values we call The Kingdom.

And maybe, one way we might read today’s passage, with some humility, is to turn it on its head and hear it as a warning to us when we, in the church, act like those leaders who called Jesus diabolical. For we too can fail to hear the cries from the margins.

Only a few weeks ago a lady came up to me at LunchBreak in some distress because that day the leader of a foreign national church had endorsed his country’s war efforts describing them as the *will of God. I know you wouldn’t say that*, she said to me, but she was distraught that anyone could say that – that invading, not defending but aggressively invading a country and killing thousands could be the desire of a God of love and justice. My Lunchbreak friend isn’t religious or a church goer, but she instinctively knew that part of the Church has got it seriously wrong.

So today, we hear Jesus say to us *Do not be afraid.* Live with conviction as you seek to serve a God of loving kindness and challenging justice, do not be deflected from making a bold witness because I, the God who knows the number of hairs upon your head, will always be with you so that yours can be a life of integrity.

And isn’t it interesting that those Senators in AD96 condemned the memory of Domitian to oblivion, but today, almost 2,000 years later, we are still taking about, and being inspired by, the words of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the name of God, who knows when every sparrow falls, and who stands alongside us to give us strength and hope each new day.

Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 23rd June 2023*