

FEAR

Jeremiah 20. 7-13

Romans 6. 1b-11

Matthew 10. 24-39

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Fear. Is there any more pervasive or powerful motivating force in human experience?

From the moment we are born, we learn to fear the world around us. Fear is an adaptive behaviour that we learn to identify threats. It is an ability that has allowed humans to survive predators and natural disasters. When we are born, we have only two innate fears: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. But as we grow up, we learn other fears. Political leaders have long recognised the power of fear in ensuring our conformity to the structures this world, even when doing so does not serve our best interests. Fear is the driving force behind vast segments of our economy, as well as (increasingly) our political priorities.

Our Lord recognises that fear can also cause failure in discipleship. Jesus's disciples courageously have left the security of their homes and families to follow him as they proclaim the advent of God's reign; but they, too, will know and ultimately bow before the power of fear. Faithful proclamation and practice of the gospel inevitably put disciples on a collision course with the powers of this world. So, as Christ prepares his disciples in chapter 10 of St Matthew's gospel for their mission to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel', he is starkly realistic about the threats they will face. At the same time, he explains why they should not let this fear master them or hinder their witness.

Our Lord's mission discourse in Matthew 10 is a 'get-out-the-volunteers' campaign like no other. On the one hand, the disciples are granted remarkable powers to heal, exorcise demons, cleanse lepers, and to raise the dead. But he also denies them money, pay for their work, extra clothes, a staff for protection, and even sandals. As the beginning verses of the chapter tell us, the disciples are to undertake their mission in complete vulnerability and dependence on God (10. 8-11), knowing that they go as 'sheep in the midst of wolves'; that they will face arrests and beatings, opposition from family members, and hatred and persecution (10. 16-23).

I wonder, why does Jesus highlight the horrors that await the disciples? Probably because naming aloud the suffering to be endured and its causes is the first step to freeing them from the tenacious grip of fear. In the latter half of the mission discourse, which is our appointed text for today, Christ continues to describe worst case scenarios, wound together with statements of reassurance and repeated calls to resist fear. The most important element of reassurance lies in the relationship that is affirmed between the disciples and our Lord; and through him, between the disciples and God.

'Do not fear' is the dominant, recurrent message in our passage (cf. 10. 26, 28, 31). But first Jesus offers a warning: whatever fate awaits teachers or masters also awaits their disciples and slaves (10. 24-25). If (here and in other chapters of Matthew's gospel) members of Israel's elite have called our Lord Beelzebul, or the 'prince of demons' (cf. 9. 34, 12. 24), then the disciples should be ready for a similar response. 'Have no fear of them' says Jesus (10. 26).

The claim that whatever is covered up will be uncovered and secrets made known refers to the power of the gospel to disclose; and as the disciples embark in mission, their simplicity, vulnerability, and dependence on God will demonstrate the reality of God's presence and character in the face the world's claims to possess real power.

Even if the spreading of the gospel will bring suffering, the gospel must now be proclaimed ‘in the light and from the housetops’ (10. 27), for the gospel proclaimed and lived is the most powerful tool at the disciples’ disposal against the powers of this world.

The threat of death may be the most powerful fear for the disciples; and Christ’s next expression of reassurance addresses this fear directly (10. 28-31). The right to kill is one of the chief props in the façade of human political power. Our Lord admits that humans exercise this power, but notes that they have power only to kill the body, not the whole person. God alone can destroy both soul and body (10. 28); God alone, therefore, is the one we should fear.

Jesus presents God’s power as surpassing that of all others, and then reassures the disciples that God is not, in fact, like those who possess human or worldly powers. God knows and cares for the sparrows that are sold ‘two for a penny’. And he even knows the hairs on our heads better than we do (10. 29-31, cf. 6. 25-33). The threat of violence and death are real concerns for the disciples, but no longer the determining force in their lives; because God, the one who has ultimate power over our whole being, exercises his power with mercy and love.

The sayings in the latter part of our passage (10. 32-39) again encourage the disciples to remain firm in their commitment to Christ and their mission, even if that mission generates inevitable conflicts, possibly within their own families. Our Lord’s saying in verse 34 no doubt surprises us, but it is crucial: although Jesus has called his disciples to be peacemakers in an earlier chapter of Matthew’s gospel (5. 9), he states here that his mission does not bring peace, but a sword, so long as worldly and human powers resist God’s rule and will. The very act of peace-making, as Christ’s ministry ultimately demonstrated, can generate violence; because healing, restoration,

and the conquest of death threaten the foundations of all human assertions of power in defiance of God.

Finally, the call to discipleship renders secondary all other claims upon one's identity and allegiance, even to father or mother, or son or daughter (10. 37, cf. 8. 21-22, 12. 46-50). In 'taking up the cross' (10. 38-39), the disciples' mission and fate are aligned with that of our Lord; that is, with the humiliation, suffering, shame, opposition, and death that Jesus experienced. But Christ promises that those who 'lose their life' for him will in fact 'find it'; while those who 'find their lives' in the world will lose them (10. 39).

To many modern Christians, our Lord's speech in this passage may seem strange and even fanatical. Yet in every generation, there have been disciples of Jesus who have found themselves in situations exactly like the ones that Christ describes. If we do not believe that speaking of Christian witness, persecution, poverty and martyrdom are important today, perhaps we need to re-examine our own version of Christianity and ask whether we have re-fashioned the Christian faith to correspond to our own tastes.

Yet hopefully this passage will not seem totally alien to us; because in concentrated form, it reveals the essence of the Christian life. What is the essence of the Christian life? It is speaking freely of how God acted in history through the incarnation of our Lord; it is having a concern for Christian mission in the world; it is letting go of both material possessions and of our fear of what others might think of us or do to us; it is placing our loyalty to God above all other loyalties. This call to a life of mission was issued not only to Jesus's twelve disciples. The truth is that all disciples (including you and me) are called to be apostles and to participate in mission.

How then is the disciples' fear to be faced? We are encouraged by Christ to clearly recognise the façades of human power; to be aware of the conflict and division that the gospel inevitably produces; and especially to know that God is present with us as we go about mission in the world; for he will show us his mercy and his compassion.

Amen.