

Bishop Jonathan Gibbs – Sermon for Trinity 2

Matthew 10: 24-39

21st June 2020

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's good to be with you today and to share in your worship. Thank you for your faithfulness and perseverance in these strange and difficult times.

The Gospel reading for today is a very challenging and perhaps even disturbing passage of Scripture. It questions our picture of Jesus as someone who brings peace and harmony, and instead portrays him as someone who (sometimes at least) can bring conflict and division. That is an uncomfortable idea and one that we need to think about carefully, not least because it could have implications for us as followers of Jesus – but more of that in a moment.

The context for this passage is that Matthew Chapter 10 consists of Jesus commissioning the twelve disciples to go out in mission, expanding and extending the work that Jesus has already been doing. These are the workers that Jesus is sending out into the harvest field.

There are three main themes woven into this passage, each of which is very relevant to us as followers of Jesus in today's world. And the first theme is this:

Following Jesus won't always be easy – it may even bring you into conflict. Now if you had said that when I first became a Christian, back at university, then I guess it might have referred to getting a bit of stick in the college bar for being a “God-botherer” or some such. But certainly outside of university being a Christian was not something that attracted much opposition – most people in the village where I lived considered themselves “Church of England”, or perhaps Methodist, as we lived next door to the local chapel.

In recent years, though, things seem to have changed. We have seen the rise of a much more militant form of atheism, and Christianity has often been portrayed (sometimes justifiably) as not merely outmoded but actually oppressive. In this context, being a Christian and especially speaking up for our faith can indeed bring us into conflict with others, even in our own families. Now at times Christians have brought this on themselves by the arrogance and insensitivity with which they have acted and spoken, but at other times, it is simply because the message that there is a God who calls us to follow him is itself seen as the problem. And in times like these, Christians therefore face a choice – to keep ourselves to ourselves and our faith private, or to take up the challenge that Jesus gave to his disciples – to go with the flow or to swim against the tide.

And that brings us to the second theme in this passage, where Jesus says to his disciples, *“Don't be afraid – because your Father in heaven knows you and cares for you.”* Notice that he does not say that nothing bad will happen to them; he does not make empty promises. But Jesus does remind them and reassure them of the Father's love and care for them. All of us know times when we are afraid, and we all know that fear can stop us from doing the right thing – even down to stopping us from going to the doctor to ask about that pain we have had for the last month or two.

You see, the problem is that *fear disables us*. It wakes us in the night and gnaws away at us. It exhausts us and saps our energy. And the way to deal with it is to focus not on the things we are afraid of, but on the love and care that God has for us – the God who numbers even the hairs on our heads. In the midst of these uncertain and often fearful times, this is also what we need to do each and every day, and especially when we come to share in worship Sunday by Sunday. At the moment we can't meet up physically and hold someone's hand for reassurance, but in our worship and through our prayers we can help one another to lift our eyes from our fears, and to focus instead on the love and care that God has for each one of us. Fear *disables us* – but the love of God can *enable us* to look beyond our fear and to do the things we need to do.

So just what are the things that we need to do – what is it that Jesus is asking us to do, in this passage and in our current situation? Well, alongside our following Jesus in our daily lives, the central thing here is that Jesus is commissioning his followers to *speak out* in his name. Please note that this does not mean sitting in the comfort of our arm chairs and firing off a few tweets or even a letter to the local newspaper. There is a brilliant clip on the internet at the moment of Barack Obama talking to a group of young people and telling them that just making a noise on social media is not what it's about. He calls them to go out and to get involved in making a difference, in building relationships in their communities, in helping the needy and the vulnerable, and in working to change attitudes and to break down barriers. This is about, as they say, *having skin in the game*, not just shouting from the side-lines.

And that is exactly what Jesus was telling the disciples to do. He was sending them out to preach the gospel and to heal the sick – with no bag and no purse, just in the clothes they stood up in. This was about proclaiming the love of God and demonstrating our love of our neighbour, both together at the same time. *And that is what we are called to do in our generation: to go out, to get involved and to speak out*. The problem is that we have lost our way and we have lost the confidence to do that. Or we may get involved in some form of social action, which is great in itself, but we don't also dare to tell the story of the love of God and the call of Jesus on our lives.

Right now, our world is in a state of upheaval; there are all sorts of things going on, and people are asking questions about where we should be going; many are longing for change and willing to help make it happen – whether it is Black Lives Matter or the whole question of poverty and inequality. This week Marcus Rashford was able to make a difference by the way he got involved and spoke out. We may not have his wealth and his fame, but we can and should seek to do the same, wherever God has put us.

Following Jesus is not always easy – it may sometimes bring us into conflict. Jesus never said it would be – but he does assure us of the love and care that God has for each of us. He sends us out, to get involved, to make a difference wherever we can, *and* to speak about the love of God and the call of Jesus upon our lives. This has always been the deal – but now, with our society in this time of upheaval and uncertainty, there is a real opportunity and responsibility for us to play our part in shaping the future. So, are you ready to join in with what God is doing? Amen.