

Sermon for Sunday 25 June 2023 – Matthew 10:24-39

Lord, open the ears of our hearts, that we may hear your message to us today. Amen

I do love a good quiz night. Especially when the players on my table are much better at trivia than I am. Mind you, it's teamwork. What some around the table might not know, others might know, so in the end, we complement each other.

When you do a Bible quiz, a question that oftens pops up is: 'which command is repeated most often in the Bible?' You might think it's something quite stern and serious: Repent! Do good! Worship God with all your heart! Give more! Or even Love one another.

But no. The command most often repeated in the Bible is: Do not be afraid. 365 times to be exact. One for each day that the Lord gives us. How amazing is that?!



In our gospel story today, we can easily understand why Jesus needs to tell his disciples not to be afraid. His instructions are not only frightening, they are also confusing.

Imagine yourself in that group, among the first disciples, your friends, Matthew, James, Peter, Andrew, and all the others. And this is what you hear: the authorities will be after you; you will suffer, there will be physical and emotional violence; people will call you names. But do not be afraid.'

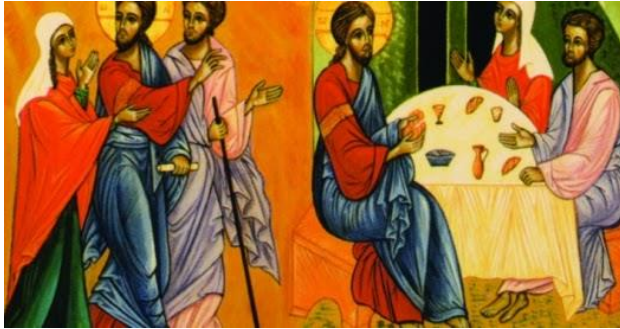
How do you feel when you hear these words? How can we hear the message 'Do not be afraid' when our human reason tells us that following Jesus is indeed a risky experience.

So let us unpick what Jesus says.

We'll start with the end of our reading. Scary words: 'I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.' The passage about sons and fathers, daughters and mothers is a quote from the prophet Micah who predicts terrible divisions every time God does something new. When God acts to rescue his people, there are always some who declare 'we don't need rescuing, we're fine as we are!'

Jesus uses the words from Micah to remind his disciples, and to remind us today, that this is part of our tradition. It's as if Jesus is saying: 'God is doing a new thing, I am bringing you something radically new, so stay sharp, because there will be many who will prefer comfort to challenge.'

But the challenge of Jesus' sayings is matched by the remarkable promises he makes. It is then up to his followers, to us, to accept them and to live by them: 'Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it' says Jesus. Meaning those who serve their fellow human beings out of love for Jesus will find their lives in him, they belong to him. We just sang the song, with the words of another prophet, Isaiah: Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name, you are mine.



So do not be afraid. Give a cup of water to one of Jesus' least significant followers, and you're giving it to Jesus himself; give shelter to the insignificant ones, and you're giving it to Jesus himself. And whatever you do for Jesus, you do for God, 'the one who sent me', says Jesus.

Theologian Tom Wright says: 'If Jesus' people today could relearn this simple but profound lesson, the church might once again be able to go out with a message to challenge and change people's hearts.'

So what's stopping us?

Fear. Simply fear. And Jesus tells his disciples, in the first part of our reading, the only one you should fear is the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. By this Jesus does not mean God or himself, but the powers of darkness that separate us from God.

Jesus believed that Israel was faced by different enemies. There was Rome, of course, and Herod, the occupying forces. They were the ones with the power to kill people, to kill the body. And then, there were other, darker enemies, enemies of the soul, powers that take us away from God and lure us into greed, vengeance, hatred. For Jesus, the people of light are never more at risk than when they are lured into fighting the darkness with more darkness: finding scapegoats for our nation's problems, blaming others for difficulties of our own making, ignoring the suffering of others for the sake of our own comfort.

These past two weeks, we had one terrible example of fighting the darkness with more darkness. When hundreds of people, families, children, fleeing conflict, poverty, and famine sank off the coast of Greece, they were abandoned and left to die. They died because of fear, the fear of the Western world that has this constructed idea that it has no room for very poor people coming from a different culture, with a different skin colour or a different faith, hoping for a better future, hoping for a bit of work, to get back on their feet and start again. On the other hand, the Western World spared no expense to try and recover five very rich tourists in a submarine in the North Atlantic. Ships, planes, remotely operated vehicles, entire days spent searching and helping. No fear there. We know these people. They're like us.

But Jesus says: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care.' Sparrows from Britain, from Europe, from Ukraine, but also sparrows from Syria, from Afghanistan, from Egypt, from African countries, all loved in equal measure.

'Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered', says Jesus, 'so do not be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows.'

There we have it, one of Jesus' most striking promises about the detailed love and care of God, not only of every one of his creatures, but for every hair on their heads.

God is the one we do not have to fear. Indeed, he is the one we can trust with our lives, our souls, our bodies, everything.

And if God really takes note of every single sparrow in the sky, and every single hair of our heads, then nothing is too small for him to care about it. Every little thing we do for the least of God's children, every little help we offer, every little prayer we pray, every little word of comfort we share, every act of love matters greatly to God.



Do not be afraid. Our gospel reading today invites us to a change of heart, to a life lived with confidence, safe in the knowledge that God knows and cares about the details of our lives, even as we face the temptations and dangers which so easily surround us.

Followers of Jesus are bound to expect attacks at all levels. But they should also learn that the one they are serving is stronger than the strongest opponent they will ever meet.

Let us pray.

Almighty God,
remove all fear from our hearts;
remind us, all the days of our lives,
that we are precious in your sight;
and send us out to do your work,
with renewed confidence and generosity
for all of your children.

Amen