

There is so much packed into our Gospel passage today even though it is only 16 verses, I really wasn't sure where to start. So I read it and reread it, I borrowed some very large tomes from Jon - which sadly didn't particularly direct me, then I reread the passage again. So I really have been dwelling in the word.

But in the end, three things kept jumping out at me so I thought that is where I should be focusing my attention.

They were

- Do not be afraid
- I did not come to bring peace but a sword
- Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

So firstly – “do not be afraid” it's apparently the most common command in the bible – I knew you frequently came across it, but was surprised to discover that it occurs 365 times. Now I haven't checked this – but perhaps that is a challenge to us all for the coming year – to find one of these commands each day!

And I'm getting us off to a head start as this passage commands us three times not to fear.

The first of these - Do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.

Evil loves the darkness and the shadows, evil deeds are often done under the cover of darkness – but God will not permit evil to win – he sent Jesus as the light of the world and this passage goes on to say What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.

We are to be bold and speak out – not to be fearful and hide away in the dark – we are to share our faith boldly and with love.

As Christians we are called to stand in the light – not in the shadows or the dark – it is all too easy to be swayed by the ties of the world, to fall in with those around us in order for a peaceful life and to allow things to go unsaid for fear of a reaction! We as the family of Holy Trinity Sunningdale should be known as a community where the truth is always spoken, where we can listen to one another's views and honour alternative viewpoints, where we don't take personal offence because someone has a different political viewpoint or opinion to our own. We should stand against gossip and whispering and encourage discussion with love, honour and respect.

The second time in the passage that 'do not fear' occurs reminds us of the limited power of those who stand against us – Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

People can hurt us – but we have to remember that they have no power at all over our souls – only God has power over eternity.

And the third mention given of why we should not to fear is that we are - worth more than many sparrows.

This reminds us of God's compassionate love – He even cares for the tiniest of creatures – including every one of the millions of sparrows. The passage also notes that even the hairs on our head are numbered. Too numerous for us to count perhaps but for God nothing is impossible. The God who cares for the smallest bird falling to the ground of course also cares for every single hair on our head. God sees all, God sees everything.

We should do nothing out of fear – fear is the antithesis of faith. As Christians we should be people of courage.

So now I'll turn to the second phrase within our reading that struck me – the verse - I did not come to bring peace but a sword.

This statement is quite surprising as we usually think of Jesus as being a peace maker not a fighter!

And on top of the Courts of Justice, the Old Bailey, there is the golden figure of justice holding a double edged sword aloft in one hand and scales in the other.

Here Jesus is referring to a sword of justice separating right from wrong – when the time comes will we be found standing in the light, with the oppressed and the needy or are we too focused on our own interests – our own possessions, our earthly interests?

As Christians we are called to be people of justice to stand in the light and not allow indifference or the easy route - even in our own homes and with our own families!

It is a fundamental principle of justice that the truth must be told and brought into the light.

Jesus reminds us that there is no safe middle ground halfway between the light and the shadows – the sword of justice will cut through everything. Our reading goes on to say "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

This links with the last very familiar phrase from our reading that struck me – Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

For most of us as Christians here in Sunningdale we will not suffer physically for following Jesus as many of those would have who listened to Jesus that day. For most of us our faith has led to more friendships – here in Holy Trinity we refer to ourselves as the church family and that was very evident during the pandemic when people looked out for each other and has continued since in our desire to show our love for our community via our café, our foodbank and hardship fund.

But persecution occurs when we challenge power, demand change, undermine the status quo. If we are faithful there is a good chance that at some time we will face opposition, and at those times we should remember Christ's cross and stand firm and shine our light.

We live in a "what's in it for me" type of world where we are tempted constantly to focus on what we can get rather than what we can give. But truly happy people are those who live for something larger than themselves.

We are called to speak our faith boldly, fearlessly, with confidence and shine a light into all those dark murky corners – knowing that God cares for every bit of us and sees us.

Amen

**Carol Elsasser, 25 June 2023**