

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Recap of the Mission

In today's gospel reading expands on instructions for the twelve explained by Hughes excellent sermon last week. Which is available on the Benefice website.

In Mathew 10 Jesus promotes his 12 disciples, his student, to apostle, that is, individuals sent out on a mission and with a message

Their Mission is to proclaim the good news to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" of "The arrival of God's kingdom of heaven in the person of Jesus. Shall we say this message is controversial.

To aid their mission, the disciples are delegated remarkable powers to heal and so cure every disease and every sickness as a demonstration of the truth of this claim

Jesus denies his disciples wages for their work, extra clothing or even extra sandals. This means the undertake the mission vulnerable and dependent on God knowing that they are sheep amongst wolves. But trusting in the Lord.

Expect trials and tribulations

Jesus wants his disciples to begin their mission with their eyes side open. So he warns his disciples of the trials and tribulations that they can expect

- that they can expect **rejection of their word.**
- that they can **expect persecutions** with the associated a risk of flogging or imprisonment or even death

Which brings us to the opening verse of today's gospel reading, verse 24. Disciples must expect to be treated the same as their master: So just as the Jewish power elites slander Jesus as "the prince of demons" so his disciples must expect similar defamation – they will be misunderstood as they go about their mission.

The right type of Fear

Jesus then explicitly offers advice on avoiding being paralysed by misplaced fear. Why. Because Jesus recognises that misplaced fear can weaken or even fatally undermine the disciple's mission of witness

Jesus offers the worst-case scenario; human political powers can kill. Jesus accepts that but notes humans can only kill the body but not the soul.

Only God has the power to save our souls and to offer eternal life. So the right type of fear is to be in awe at the majesty of a God who can destroy both soul and body

However, Mathew reminds us that God is not at all like earthly powers. His love is unbounded. He knows and cares for even two sparrows sold for a penny. He knows our every intimate detail such as the number of hairs on our head. He knows us inside and out. So do not be afraid

Not Peace, but a Sword

In verses in 10:32-39 Jesus is equally open and honest as he prepares his disciples for the potential for conflict that may strain or even break that the strongest of human bonds, the **family unit**

Verse 34 “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Is both stark and challenging. Commentators have said that in this passage **sword** is not military but refers to the potential divisions that discipleship can bring if there are conflict of loyalties between friends and family

Remember, Jesus has a very different, counter cultural, understanding of family. In Matthew 12 that when pressed about his mother’s brothers wanting to talk to him he says “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” 49 And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

So Jesus has a different understanding of what is meant by family. And he is not at all arguing that the family unit be abandoned. He is pointing out that in **the worst-case scenario**, where family members become foe, then our primary allegiance is to Christ.

I will return to this point

Take Up our Cross

Our gospel reading ends with a final open and honest, frank : Disciples of Christ are expected to take up our cross and align ourselves with the journey of Jesus, with the opposition and conflict that involves

Reflections

In preparing this sermon one line stuck out “We must not fall into the trap of thinking "If we were really following Jesus, we'd be persecuted too," Let me offer some correctives.

Witney is not Rome

First off let’s just consider our context within West Witney. **Witney is not Rome**. As part of my lay ministry training I Street preached outside Witney. Not very effectively I might mention. Not my gifting. But there was never the threat of arrest, flogging or even execution.

The opposition I felt on that day was indifference and pity: “that’s a weird person doing that weird thing”. Does he really teach our children?

Few are called to be itinerant apostles

We all have different gifts and talents. **Few are called to be itinerant apostles** preaching the word in strange place

Rather, **our proclamation of the gospel works** itself out in more subtle ways, primarily being a good neighbour channelling God’s love through acts of mercy and kindness within our community

Never underestimate the impact of being different in a good way. The most powerful Christian witnesses spreads the gospel without speaking. People are drawn to individuals who exude a peace that passes all understanding and asked why. What has this person got? How can I get that?

Our experience of conflict and opposition will vary with our individual context

Our experience of conflict and opposition will vary with our individual context. The gospel reading is Jesus being open and frank and honest with his disciples about worst-case scenarios

in spreading the good but highly controversial news for mainstream Jewish culture in a hostile first century Israel occupied by brutal Roman authority

Our contexts are very different. **Let me give you the best-case scenario.** Your family social and work cultural interactions settings broadly speaking reflect Christian values conflict and opposition will be minimal

Tensions begin to surface when our family friends work associates or bosses act in unchristian unfair ways. They may do what we think is wrong but expect us to either to be complicit in the silence or to collaborate in varying degrees of wrongdoing, wrongdoing according to our understanding of Christian scripture. My heart sinks when run up to ask if our computer is faulty. What must that be like?

It does not take much imagination to see how speaking out against friends, family work colleagues and bosses can be costly; can lead to being socially ostracised, passed over for promotion, or even sacked

Today's passage is a frank warning the taking about cross and following Jesus is likely to cause varying degrees of conflict and opposition. There will be sacrifice of self-interest. But **in giving up our self-interest and promoting the Kingdom we find true life.**

We have the Holy Spirit

And Matthew 10 also reminds us that our spiritual journey is not in isolation. In advancing the Kingdom Jesus walks by our side and the Holy Spirit inspires us to know what to say and do

Persecution in the World

Finally there must be an explicit recognition that there are Christians outside Witney and areas of the world who suffer opposition and persecution beyond our imagination

We give thanks for the work and leadership Caroline Cox in the **Hart charity.**

We also give thanks for the work done by the local charity **Open Doors**

Both these organisations operate in areas which bring hope and healing to oppressed Christians

There are many ways by which we can help Hart and open doors.

- We can subscribe to their email and hold up particular projects in our prayers.
- If financial circumstances allow we can make regular donations by standing order to practically help their work.

The point is our spiritual journey will encounter headwinds and varying degrees of persecution but our walk is emboldened and supported by the spirit and a loving father who knows every wrinkle and cares deeply for our well-being

So as I said, for us self-interested cowards who like to follow the line of least resistance and have an easy life this passage is difficult. We are called to acknowledge Christ before others - even if doing so may have unpleasant consequences

And yet, True life is not found in pleasing ourselves or avoiding awkward situations. True life is found in the sacrifice of self interest to Christ. For **in giving up our self-interest and promoting the Kingdom we find true life.**