

ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

NEW YORK CITY

A BOLD CHRISTIAN MISSION

Matthew 10:16-33

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 22, 2008

The heart of what Jesus was talking about in today's Holy Gospel appointed for us is an insight into human conditions. People can live shabby and dreary lives, but even those who appear to have everything in life may come up empty-handed or worse, they may destroy their lives in a mistaken pursuit of fulfillment. This is a continuation of Jesus discourse to prepare the disciples for an evangelistic mission. He was encouraging them to see the advantage they had in viewing life as it really is.

We must pay close attention to the second half of Matthew chapter 10, it contains instructions about what we can expect and what we must do while we wait for the coming of the Lord. We need to think about these words carefully.

In a World of Chaos We can Expect Opposition: In Jesus' teaching on evangelism, He pointed out that the disciples were not to be intimidated by what was going on in the world. The first thing these verses from today's Gospel lesson tell us is that we can expect opposition. As far as the disciples were concerned, they could expect that in time they would be "handed over to the local councils and flogged in their synagogues." This is what happened to Peter and other apostles in Acts 5:40: "And when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let the go." And this happened to Paul: "From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one" (2nd Corinthians 11:24). As far as we are concerned, we can expect to be hated even by members of our own family and to be severely persecuted, even to the point of being put to death.

We should expect persecution because Jesus was treated this way and "a student is not above his teacher." "If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!" Why should we be any different? We belong to Jesus, after all.

The one good thing about persecution in one place will cause us to move to other places that also need the gospel. This is what happened to the Christians in Jerusalem as a result of the persecution that followed the killing of Stephen. It was how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. Again, persecution brought the Disciples before governors and kings before whom they bore important testimony of saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can think of governors such as Felix and Festus, and kings such as Herod Agrippa I and Agrippa II. Acts documents the disciples' testimony before these rulers, and testimony such as theirs has continued through the ages as believers have been privileged to testify before local magistrates, justices, despots, tyrants, presidents, and even kings.

Speaking before the powerful people of this world might be intimidating to normal Christians like ourselves. But Jesus tells us not to worry about what we should say since the Holy Spirit will enable us to testify well and wisely when the proper time comes. *“When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matthew 10:19-20).* It is worth observing that this is an instruction for martyrs, not for preachers, who should give thought to what they will say and how to say it!

We Are Not to Be Afraid: The second major theme of Matthew 10 is that Christ's followers are not to be afraid as they pursue their evangelistic work, in spite of the hatred and persecution they will face. Jesus encouraged his disciples to take on the world of false power and delusions of grandeur. He repeated his instructions three times “do not be afraid.” Whatever Jesus had shared in private or secret they could share openly in a large way. Jesus was going to make good on whatever he taught. At the final judgment those who have persecuted Christ's followers will be exposed as the wicked persons they are, and those who have been faithful to Christ will be exonerated. The good they have done will taken notice of and according to Matthew 25, where Christ's faithful servants are rewarded with Jesus' commendation: “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness.” And those who have done good to others for Christ's sake are praised for it: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

What Jesus was telling them in private now, things they did not understand fully but would understand after the resurrection; they should proclaim full and widely then. This is a word for every Christian, but it is special instruction for preachers, for it tells those who would preach the gospel three things: (1.) All of God's preacher-missionary must listen to Jesus, for no one can speak for Jesus until Jesus has first spoken to them. (2.) The man or woman must speak only what they have heard from Jesus and not something that comes out of their own minds or imagination. (3.) Everyone must speak Christ's words even if their speaking gains them the hatred of the world.

William Barclay, who makes these points in his commentary on Matthew, tells about an occasion when Hugh Latimer, one of the most outstanding figures of the English Reformation, was preaching before King Henry VIII. He was about to say something he knew the king would dislike, so he held an audible dialogue with himself in the pulpit, calling out, "Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say, the king is here." Then he paused and went on: "Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say: The King of kings is here." Such knowledge gives boldness in Christ's preachers. They know that one day they will give an accounting to the King of all kings. This is what gave such boldness to John Knox. They said as they buried Knox; "Here lies one who feared God as much that he never feared the face of any man."

The Soul Matters More than the Body: God is Life: In essence Jesus was saying that God offers life to a death-infested humanity. In saying what he did in such a challenging way, Jesus was not unmindful of the power his enemies wielded. He knew that if they were capable of taking his life, they were also capable of making martyrs of the disciples. We are not afraid of the powerful people of this world so much that the soul matters more than the body and that, at the worst, the rulers of this world can take only our lives. If we are going to be afraid of anyone, it should be God, who alone will determine our final destinies. Jesus said it like this: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Even if the evil powers are bent on destroying the world and all that is good in it, you do not have to fear them. If they elect to destroy you over your protests against their evil and because you evangelize for good, don't fear them. Remember your allegiance is to the God who created and redeemed you. What else but such a transcendent, eternal perspective enabled Martin

Luther to declare before the mighty of his day: “Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.” We should remember that it is not in an earthly body but in a spiritual body that we will share that kingdom with.

Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever.

Confessing Christ: An Integrated Life: Jesus encouraged his disciples to challenge the world with the gospel. Moreover, Jesus offered great consolation. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father, and even the hair of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows.” God dwells within us to protect us through our Lord Jesus Christ. The point of all this is the necessity of deciding for Christ and remaining faithful to Christ until the end. We cannot drift along and expect that everything will turn out all right.

As our lives are integrated by faith through our Lord Jesus Christ, however, we are able honestly to deal with our thoughts, feelings, and impulses in relationship to ourselves, to others, and to God. In this process of integration by faith in Christ helps us to discover that we do not have to create our self-defense, self-esteem, self-worth, or righteousness. It comes as a gift of God in Christ. We do not have to be obsessed with self-concern, for we discover that the one who is the most concerned for us is none other than God. God is not too busy to take the time to count the hairs on our head.

A Life Readily Available: Our Lord’s observation about the Father’s intimate concern for our lives is fortified by his promise. We are the vessels of God’s love and grace for redeeming a mad, mad world. Jesus assures us that if we engage with him in this redeeming work, he will acknowledge us before the Father in heaven. When we share the good news of God’s grace in Christ, we are true to our discipleship.

On the other hand, to fail to share the good news is to allow the world to suffer the damage it brings upon itself and to endure the possibility of damaging ourselves eternally. We need not even consider that possibility. Far better that we accept all of the love, encouragement, and assurances of

our Lord to become bold evangelists in witnessing to a world that is doomed without us.

These words were spoken nearly two thousand years ago, and it is through obedience to them that Christ's followers have taken the gospel of salvation from sin by his death throughout the world. It is because of these words that the gospel is being presented to you now. In Christ's name and by his authority, I say to you; "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." In Christ's name and by the same authority, I also say, "Reject Jesus Christ and you will perish forever." I cannot make the matter any clearer than that.