

Fear... (Matthew 10.24-39) – Pentecost 3

Matthew chapter 10 is full of words that are familiar to most of us in the Christian church. One wonders if they were all originally spoken together as they appear here? More likely they were disconnected sayings which have been woven together here as a kind of manifesto. The context in Matthew 10 is mission (this section is sometimes called The Sermon on Mission). Jesus has gathered his twelve disciples and is about to send them out. Before they go, he gives them this ‘list’ of instructions. They make for pretty sobering reading and have been known to cause some squirming in the pews when read in church. Being a disciple is no stroll in the park – it requires single-mindedness, courage and trust.

It is helpful to know that the original community to which ‘Matthew’ is writing was likely a Jewish Christian community living in the north of Israel/Palestine in the period after the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple (70CE). Given that they were under threat from without and that there were tensions within the community, the uncompromising sense of Matthew’s text makes sense. There is joy, but there is also challenge and we must rise to this if we are to stay the course. Throughout the chapter, the words ‘fear not’ function as a kind of refrain, and to explore this theme, I am going to draw heavily on a reflection prepared by New Testament scholar Stanley Saunders. Saunders teaches at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. He also visits men on death row in Georgia. Saunders writes...

“Fear. Is there any more pervasive or powerful motivating force in human experience? From the moment we are born, we learn to fear the world around us, certainly to fear the stranger, sometimes to fear even those who are closest to us. Political leaders have long recognized the power of fear in ensuring our conformity to the structures this world, even when doing so does not serve our best interests. Fear is the driving force behind vast segments of our economy, as well as, increasingly, our political priorities.

Jesus recognizes that fear will also cause the failure of discipleship. Jesus' disciples courageously leave the security of their homes and families to follow him as they proclaim the advent of God's reign, but they, too, will know and ultimately bow before the power of fear. Faithful proclamation and practice of the gospel inevitably puts disciples on a collision course with the powers of this world. So, as Jesus prepares his disciples for their mission to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel', he is starkly realistic about the threats they will face, at the same time he builds the case for why they should not let this fear master them or hinder their witness.

Jesus' mission discourse is a 'get-out-the-volunteers' campaign like no other. On the one hand, the disciples are granted remarkable powers to heal, exorcise demons, cleanse lepers, even to raise the dead. But he also denies them money, pay, extra clothes, a staff for protection, even sandals. They are to undertake their mission in complete vulnerability and dependence on God (10.8-11), even knowing that they go as 'sheep in the midst of wolves', face arrests and beatings, opposition even from family members, and hatred and persecution (10.16-23).

Why does Jesus highlight the horrors that await the disciples? Naming aloud the suffering to be endured and its causes is the first step in freeing them from the tenacious grip of fear. In the latter half of the discourse, where our focus lies, Jesus continues to describe worst case scenarios, wound together with statements of reassurance and repeated calls to resist fear. The most important element of reassurance lies in the integral relationship that is affirmed between the disciples and Jesus, and through him, God.

'Do not fear' is the dominant, recurrent message in 10.24-31 (cf. 10.26, 28, 31). But first Jesus offers a warning: whatever fate awaits teachers or masters also awaits their disciples and slaves (10.24-25). If Israel's elites call Jesus 'the prince of demons' (cf. 9.34, 12.24), the disciples should be ready for a similar response. 'So have no fear of them' (10.26).

The claim that whatever is covered up will be uncovered and secrets made known arises from the disclosive power of the gospel, in which the disciples participate through the means of their mission. Their simplicity, vulnerability, and dependence on God demonstrate the reality of God's presence and character in the face the world's claims to possess real power. Even though doing so will bring suffering, the gospel must now be proclaimed 'in the light and from the housetops' (10.27), for the gospel proclaimed and lived is the most powerful tool at the disciples' disposal against the powers of this world.

The threat of death may be the most powerful form of fear. Jesus' next expression of reassurance addresses this fear directly, yet with irony (10.28-31). The right to kill is one of the chief props in the façade of human political power. Jesus admits that humans exercise this power, but notes that they have power only to kill the body, not the whole person. God alone can destroy both soul and body (10.28); God alone, therefore, is the one we should fear.

This claim represents God's power as surpassing, but similar in kind to that of human rulers. Jesus then reassures the disciples that God is not, in fact, like the powers. God knows and cares even for the sparrows that are sold 'two for a penny'. God knows even the hairs on our heads better than we do (10.29-31, cf. 6.25-33). The threat of violence and death are real concerns for the disciples, but no longer the determining force in their lives, for the one who has ultimate power over our whole being exercises that power with mercy and love.

The sayings in 10.32-39 again encourage disciples to remain firm in their commitment to Jesus and their mission, even when that mission generates inevitable conflicts, even within their families. The saying in 10.34 is crucial: although Jesus has called his disciples to be peacemakers (5.9), his mission does not bring peace, but a sword, so long as the powers resist God's rule and will. The very act of peacemaking, as Jesus' ministry demonstrates, generates violence, for healing, restoration, and the conquest of death threaten the foundations of all human assertions of power in defiance of God.

Finally, the call to discipleship renders secondary all other claims upon one's identity and allegiance, even to father or mother, or son or daughter (10.37, cf. 8.21-22, 12.46-50). To 'take up the cross' (10.38-39) aligns the disciples' mission and fate with that of Jesus, that is, with the humiliation, suffering, shame, opposition, and death that Jesus persistently speaks about here.

Taking up the cross implies identification with the marginal people (slaves and rebels) who were subject to Roman crucifixion, because they did not align themselves with or submit themselves to Rome's authority. But Jesus promises that those who 'lose their life' for him will in fact 'find it', while those who 'find their lives' in the world will lose them (10.39).

The answers to fear, then, include clear-eyed recognition of the façades of human power, even those rooted in the threat of death, awareness of the conflict and division the gospel inevitably produces, and especially the deep awareness and conviction that God is present in the world, in mercy and compassion.”

It seems to me that it is still of the essence of the discipleship to be able to recognise how human power is operating in the world. We're aware of the assault on truth by some political leaders and interest groups, who make malign use of social media to forward their self-serving agendas. We're aware of violence being used against those who seek to disrupt this system, or to shine a light on how it works. This suggests that part of what mission involves in the contemporary church is to bear witness to these destructive dynamics, to join with those who are working for justice and healing of systems and peoples. And this still requires single-mindedness, courage and trust – a deep aligning of our lives, our words, our actions with the loving, well-making being of God. And even if we ourselves aren't hitting the road, travelling from village to village as those first disciples were, we are still sent within our own families and neighbourhoods, called to have courage to stand in and for the truth, taking responsibility for making God and God's way visible where we are.