

Third Sunday after Trinity (13th Sunday of Ordinary Time)



Gospel *St Matthew 10:37—42*

At that time Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’

Homily

As we in the UK really begin easing our lockdown restrictions, and the churches are finally open again, our national conversation is turning in earnest to the future, and beginning to fill up with what the BBC has coined as ‘Rethink’: a wide reflection and debate on what we must learn for our futures to be better than our past. It’s a real paradox that a disease that is by definition indiscriminating in its reach and touch – that has been rightly dubbed the great leveller, and is certainly ‘no respecter of persons’ – has exposed with forensic exactness the awful truth that human beings are the Great Un-levellers, blind to or tolerant of inequalities. The virus is exposing enduring (even growing) unrighteousness, which is the biblical word for the massive glowering inequities and injustices in human life; and it has exposed the poverty of our sense of responsibility to our planet, revealing humans to be, like the virus itself, a voracious and aggressive life form, which flourishes now at the cost of the incremental demise and death of the very natural world on which we depend as our environment. We are all called upon to be prophets now.

The Church is joining in the debate. The *Church Times* this week has 30 assorted priorities from a range of ten authors writing on the subject. It will be – and it should be – a time of intense debate; ideas will be sifted and sorted. Christians need to participate, locally as well as at other levels, and not to be slow in doing so especially if they hope to shape its outcomes.

But dear fellow-preachers beware! Practice what you preach. And for that we need to be very attentive to the words of the Lord, like those given in our Gospel this morning.

2

The passage we have just heard is the last part of Matthew 10, which is a manual for the Twelve just before they are sent out as missionaries to the surrounding villages. He has reached the final and most sobering, and challenging aspects of the training he is giving them, and he’s trying to help them get their heads round a paradox. ‘Do not think’, he says, that being *my* disciples – holding to what I have taught you, doing as I do, speaking as I speak – will be met with applause, or approval. And ‘do not think that I have come to bring peace.’ (v.34) It’s as if he’s saying, ‘Remember, you are dealing with human beings here. How you behave, what you do, what you say, based on my teaching, will *test* the heart of your listeners, just as when I

speak or act. Some will rejoice at good news; others will consider it very bad news indeed.’ That is why neither Jesus nor his followers claim to bring peace, ‘but a sword’, dividing opinion. As has often been said, before it can be good news, the gospel must at first be bad news. There is no individual, group or nation, for whom the first word in the gospel is not ‘repent’ when the message of salvation draws close to them.

This is the immediate backdrop to the words we heard in the gospel, which falls into *two* parts. [See *the passage at the top*] In the first part we learn, in the famous opening words of the *Rule* of St Benedict, to ‘Prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ’, and in the second part, we hear Jesus’s final encouragement, highlighting the reward that will be felt by those who receive what his disciples offer them as a gift from God himself.

Let us think about these two groups of verses briefly. In the first, Jesus highlights three responses that are not ‘worthy of him’. If his disciples love their family space and family ties more than him, if a disciple tries to follow him while evading ‘the cross’, and if a disciple seeks to experience life in selfish terms, excluding the needs of others. These are all unworthy of his disciples. It’s not a moral judgement on any of us. Jesus is simply describing a spiritual fact that he has himself discovered, and teaches it. He prioritises the kingdom of God before his human family ties and duties; he experiences the rejection of his words and actions; he lays down his life for others in order to discover its true meaning. If such is the shape of the master’s life (and he is the personification of the kingdom) then it must be the shape of the disciples’ lives. Discipleship *requires* us to prioritise nothing above Christ, to share his experience of the cross, and to learn to die to ourselves and invest in others.

Time is always against a preacher! But I think it is worth dwelling for a moment on Jesus’s reference to family ties because it shows this very clearly. The family was the fundamental structure of the society in which Jesus lived, critical to the economic and personal security of every individual. No welfare state here; no developed economy. Just as it remains in many of the poorest places in our world today. But Jesus says, no! the horizon of his and his disciples’ mission must be the kingdom of God and the salvation of all, not the little world of the family however crucial it felt to his contemporaries. The family is a place of love and gratitude, of nurture and discovery, but it must not command and limit our affections and securities. For the newness of life that Jesus speaks of to take root, then is its necessary for a disciple to leave behind, or at least put in second place, old family-centred ways of life – that means *any* group loyalty that is not the kingdom of God. As the second-century Christian author Tertullian says, ‘We’re not *born* Christian, we *become* Christian’; and being united to Christ, being baptised, being communicants, being missionaries, means ‘seeking first the kingdom of God’. Preferring nothing to Christ is the radical edge of Christian faith and charity and justice, and undermines any theory that the Church can – ever – be a civil religion, neatly ironed out across the surface of current social, moral and civil values. What Christians do, and must do in the wake of the pandemic, they must do, as Christ himself says, ‘because of *me*’ (Mt 10.39), ‘because of the *kingdom*’ (Lk 18.29), ‘because of the *gospel*’ (Mk 8.35 and 10.29).

After such radical words, such a high calling, the second part of today’s Gospel gives an assurance to the disciples about their reception once they were in the villages and towns. St Mark (9.37) makes the same point as Matthew but in an even more pithy way: ‘Whenever anyone welcomes me *it isn’t me* they welcome, but the one who sent me’. Anyone who will welcome Christian efforts to bring the Good News into our present tired, anxious life, won’t be welcoming us. We are *not* the story. They will welcome him who sends us, Christ and his Father. Unsurprisingly, we are ‘walking sacraments’ of the faith and charity we seek to convey to others. And to be walking sacraments, to be able to *transmit* the blessing of God, and make the people of our day *recipients* of his promise, able to remake our world in the light of heaven, we must be truly united to the Saviour, loving him *above* all things, and *in* all things.

3

If this is to happen as the big Rethink continues in the months and years to come we Christians, both ordained and lay, need to remember two things.

First, to receive what we are asked to convey to others, we *need to worship*. To give Christ in charity we need to offer ourselves in prayer, and to receive Christ in his word and sacrament. We need to *thirst* for the

Eucharist, for the word, the Spirit, for God's holy gifts for God's holy people. Armchairs and kitchen tables are not good enough. Solitary Christianity is barely Christianity. Worship is the *basis* of all we have to give to the world, and our gathering to do so is the source of our mission and its point of return. It can *only* be a feature of the daily lives we live apart, if it springs from what we do when we come together in Christ, in church.

And second, the mission of God is mainly experienced by others day by day, in simple gestures; not mainly in great thoughts and enterprises, but in the little acts of intelligence towards the needs of others. Each little death-to-self grows into the great Death-to-Self. The correcting of small and barely noticeable injustices grows to the correction of the great and glowering injustices. Our human family, and every person in it, from the great cities to the rain forests, is crossing a great desert, a searing, disorienting and demanding experience. And Jesus says to you, dear fellow disciples, as he says to me, 'Whoever gives even a sip of clean cold water to such little ones, will have their reward'.

Prayer

Today is the feast of a great early bishop of the Church, one of the greatest, St Irenaeus of Lyons. These words are often attributed to him:

'It is not you that shapes God, it is God who shapes you. If then you are the work of God, await the hand of the artist who does all things in due season. Offer him your heart, soft and tractable, and keep the form in which the artist has fashioned you. Let your clay be moist, lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of his fingers.'

St Irenaeus (c130—c200)

May almighty God bless us: the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**