

A classmate of mine, whenever the going got rough, would remind us (with a smile) that we were preparing for the easiest job in the world. "The message is the same," he'd say. 'The trick is finding 52 different ways to say 'God loves you - follow Jesus - amen.' Perhaps a little simplistic, but it. Always raised a smile or two from somewhere in the group. And when I think about how many times Jesus uses that same pattern, I wonder if my classmate might be on to something.

Matthew chapter 10 is a roller coaster ride for me. Just when I think I can see the horizon, the text goes through another double loop of 'beware - look out - you are messengers of good news, and because of that, bad things are coming your way.' It is hard to find the joy in a passage that begins by describing disciples as 'sheep among wolves,' drifts into 'brother shall betray brother to death,' and will finish with 'I have not come to bring peace but a sword.' Jesus is painfully clear about the challenges facing those who pursue a better way - a God-honouring way. He reminds the disciples (v.24-25 - the end of last week's reading and the beginning of this weeks) to expect abuse because they have aligned themselves to God's cause through Jesus. But here in the midst of the stark reality of abuse and perhaps even death that might await them, comes the simple truth. Don't be afraid.

My first instinct is to shout 'Why NOT?' A disciple of Jesus - then or now - has been advised by this passage that the task is filled with obstacles. People won't just be reluctant to hear the good news - they are apt to be openly hostile. And Jesus is not calling us to be part of some underground resistance movement; "...what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.' By bold, Jesus seems to say. Be obvious. Make yourselves noticed. This is important.

The first suggestion that Jesus offers is that our fear is of the wrong thing. "Don't fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Hmm - this seems a pretty fine distinction to modern ears. Dead is dead, or so it seems to me.

But in terms of human spirituality (ancient and modern) there has always been a desire to split our existence into physical and spiritual. That kind of thinking is questionable theology - it is too easy to slide into heresy if we try to hold these identities separate from one another - but I think Jesus is reminding us that ordinary human violence, while destructive enough on its own terms - cannot completely destroy what God has called into being.

Now. Jesus' reasoning may be sound, but his example is...complicated. "Aren't sparrows sold two for a penny?" These things that are so numerous as to be nearly worthless (to us) are all held in equal regard by God.

I'm reminded - every time I read this passage - of that Sunday school song: God sees the little sparrow fall..." It's a hard song to figure out for a curious kid - sparrows dropping like snowflakes, and that is supposed to reassure me that I am loved...(if God loved the bird so much -my 8 year old brain wondered - why did it fall?) But the point is, of course, much more nuanced.

Creation is a big, wide project, and the redemption of creation is a long, slow process. And God is involved (still) with all of it. From celestial mechanics to the activity of microbes - and Jesus offers a more common example. Birds. Flowers. Hairs on your head. None of this is unnoticed by God. All of it is valued by God. God is the power that binds this all together. Human efforts to derail the project - while often horribly effective - cannot compare to the power that is striving for the redemption of all things. Do not be afraid. God loves you. Follow Jesus.

The challenges are substantial - even now. Especially now. Humans have an incredible capacity for resistance - especially to institutional change. Sensing power, our impulse is to grab on - to exercise that power to our advantage, and the advantage of those who we favour. We are better at making gods of ourselves than we are at recognizing God in our midst. So yeah, announcing the peaceable kingdom is at hand - that's going to meet some resistance. But (Jesus says in Matthew 10:32) those who follow my program (love God - follow Jesus) "I will acknowledge before my father in heaven." In other words, the power to proclaim the good news from the rooftops will come from the greatest power in the universe. God doesn't just smile on this gospel adventure - God works in and through (and among) those who take up the challenge.

Now it is true that this passage has something to say about those who deny God's power. We are quick to turn them into our enemies - quick to throw them under the cosmic bus. But I would advise caution. The oppressors can (in human power struggles) very quickly become the oppressed. The tables can turn (as they have in Afghanistan) so that winners and losers are hard to predict. And I would remind you that when Jesus proclaims God's love, it is an open invitation, never closed. Even death is no barrier to the love of God, and so we who find ourselves basking in the glow of God's favour ought to remember that there's always room for more in this particular spotlight.

God loves you. Follow Jesus. Maybe that's the secret after all.