

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 24”
Matthew 10:16-31

Jesus' mission is getting underway as he chooses his group of apostles and commissions them to go out on the road with the good news about the Kingdom of God. Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, has arrived at this point in history to make real to men and women the sovereign rule of God, to begin the task of renewing and restoring the world to the state in which God originally intended it, to tell people about the benefits and the responsibilities of living in this Kingdom and to demonstrate what it could look like through his acts of healing and liberation.

Last week, as we began to look at chapter 10, we saw Jesus bestowing on the twelve apostles his divine authority, telling them what to announce to the waiting world and describing the arrangements for carrying that out. He gave them his commands and then sent them out to get on with the task that we continue to this day. But I wonder if you know what is the most common command in the Bible. It comes three times in the words we read this morning as Jesus continues his commissioning speech. It's those four words "*Do not be afraid*". Again and again we hear those words – spoken by Jesus, by God, by angels, by God's prophets and preachers – assuring those who hear them that there's no need to be fearful. The only problem is, when you look at the situations in which they are spoken from a human point of view, there is every reason to be afraid. Celestial beings appear in your house, God manifests himself before your eyes, a land of fierce tribes waits to be conquered, your small army is hopelessly outnumbered, you're commissioned to go and preach a message of judgement to a notoriously unpredictable king – why not be afraid?

And here Jesus says it to his disciples three times – in vv26,28,31 – alerting them, very probably, to the fact that there is some tough work to be done. And the context in which they are spoken shows that this mission will, indeed, be very difficult. Following Jesus is no picnic. We might not be experiencing that in our own situation at the moment, but from the time of Jesus' commissioning onwards, you can read of how those who really took seriously the message of the Kingdom of God found themselves in some pretty hair-raising situations. The book of *Acts* is full of stories of danger and difficulty. The history of the Church is a series of episodes in which those who are radical and committed followers of Jesus sacrifice possessions, liberty and even life for his cause.

In our day, when the gospel is presented as a mixture of management and therapy, a way to get a good and easy life – when Jesus is presented as the answer to all your problems – when our pick'n'mix approach to religion and spirituality is all about what we can get out of it – we may just have missed the point that being a follower of Jesus is a risky adventure, a tough call, a summons to give up our own ideas and our own comfort in order to tread the path that Jesus trod. If you want to be a follower of Jesus you will need commitment and endurance – and you'll need to take very seriously Jesus' command not to be afraid, because there will be plenty to make you fearful and anxious. And, as he prepares his first apostles for the task ahead of them, he sets out some of the situations in which they will need to put their fear to one side.

There will be problems in your community, he tells them in vv17-20. They'll come up against it locally as they are hauled up in front of local councils and physically beaten in the synagogues. Their own friends and neighbours are going to turn into the opposition because the message of the Kingdom will jar against their own vested interests and challenge their ungodly attitudes and lifestyles. People will not be prepared to accept the challenge that the life of the Kingdom presents. And it will not just be a little local difficulty amongst their own Jewish people. They'll also find themselves at odds with the Empire, hauled up before governors and kings who resent the idea that there may another king who is superior to them. The powers of the Roman world, the Gentile world, will array themselves against the preachers of the Kingdom, the followers of the Kingly Messiah. And down through history we can read the stories of faithful followers of Jesus who have stood up to the principalities and powers to proclaim that the way of Jesus is at odds with the way of the world. It's tough if you decide to stand for Jesus rather than compromise with a culture that is inimical to the Kingdom in so many ways, if you decide to take

seriously the teaching and example of Jesus rather than acquiescing with the messages that bombard us from a secular and consumerist society.

But even closer to home, there will be problems with your families, Jesus says in *v21*. We'll expand on this a bit next time when Jesus speaks even more radical words in the next section, but just be aware that even those closest to you can make life difficult for followers of Jesus when they reject the message of the Kingdom. Brothers, parents, children – they can make life very difficult for you if you really do decide to stick with Jesus and follow him above all else. The status to which we have elevated the family in our culture makes this very difficult for us to accept, I think, but Jesus is painting a picture that has a good deal of realism in it. He doesn't tell his followers to stop loving their families or to ignore them or to disassociate themselves from them, but he does warn them that there will be trouble if they are not prepared to compromise – and so much of his teaching and his example demonstrates that compromise is not an option when it comes to Kingdom truth.

You're going to come up against it, he says. There will be physical attacks – flogging and even death. There will be mental, emotional pressure as you experience the hatred of all men (*v22* – “*all men*” meaning all men without distinction rather than without exception). There will be abuse as people call you names and try to slander you (*v25*). There will be persecution (*v23*). There will be a lot of pressure in every way, even spiritual pressure as the message is misunderstood and those who follow other paths take against you.

And don't forget that this is all on account of Jesus and his message (*v22*). You do come across people who face all kinds of persecution – even those who, rather strangely, try to court persecution as a badge of fidelity to Jesus – but very often they're being persecuted because they're unpleasant or odd or unnecessarily confrontational anyway, not because of their identification with Jesus. And, of course, there are things that happen to us simply on account of our being fragile and vulnerable human beings, things that might happen to anyone at all. Jesus isn't talking about that. He's talking about those who suffer because they want to follow his teaching.

The trouble is, I suspect most of us here – all of us here, very probably – just don't take the teaching of Jesus seriously enough. We have a very comfortable life as Christians here in Lichfield, as there's no need for anyone to trouble us. Those who do take the radical path that Jesus trod, who speak out against injustice, corruption, poverty, bullying, warmongering, inequality; those who tell other people that they need Jesus and can't rely on their wealth or education or political power to see them through – they're the ones who face opposition and difficulty. Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo's book, *Red Letter Christianity* – whatever you may think about the title and all that – asks the question of us as to what it might be like if we really took Jesus seriously: “*What if Jesus really meant what he said?*” they ask.

Yes, it's tough if we go all out for Jesus, if we do accept the commission that he gives us via these first apostles. Yes, there might be reasons for us to feel afraid – or, at least, a bit nervous. But Jesus doesn't just say, “*Do not be afraid*” and leave it at that – he gives some reasons for confidence and he offers some advice. It's clear he is not asking his followers to court persecution. There's no particular virtue in being persecuted – as one writer put it, “*Bravado is not martyrdom.*” Jesus tells his followers to use their common sense, to look out for the problems and take avoiding action. In *v16* he says they should be “*as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves*”. Keep your eyes open, look for the signs and just be careful.

In fact, he tells them in *v23* that if they are being persecuted, just move on. That may well have been easier for those first apostles than it is for us today, but the principle is the same. Just take avoiding action – not by compromising, but by getting out of the situation. He's already told them, as we read last week (*v14*), that if they aren't welcomed they should just give it up as a bad job and move on. God has given you your intelligence and your common sense, so make the most of it all and do what seems wisest.

Fortunately, though, it's not all down to us. There is, of course, the Holy Spirit, who can help those who are struggling. In *vv19,20* Jesus speaks words which have been abused by lazy preachers down through

the centuries. When I talked to someone at the church where I was working in London about my preparation for sermons they told me that I shouldn't be wasting time on preparation: they quoted this verse and told me that all I needed to do was stand up and God would speak through me. (You may have your own views on that, having listened to me for a while now.) But that is most definitely not what Jesus is saying here. He is saying that there will come situations where you are really put on the spot with no time for preparation – in court or in some tribunal – and then you can rely on the Holy Spirit for help. This is about those times when someone asks you an awkward question in the canteen at lunchtime or comes up with some weird theory about Jesus in the pub and asks you what you think. At times like that, the Holy Spirit can help you answer – and don't forget, either, that "I don't know" or "I'll think about that and get back to you" are valid answers, too. If we are truly submitted to Jesus, really aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit, then God can speak through us if we are prepared to let him.

And mention of the Holy Spirit reminds us that we are not dealing with stuff that is merely temporal and secular. There's a very powerful spiritual aspect to this and there is also an eternal aspect. One day everything will become clear and the followers of Jesus, whatever their experiences during their lives, will be vindicated. As William Barclay puts it, "*The Christian witness is the man who knows no fear, because he knows that the judgements of eternity will correct the judgements of time.*" It will all turn out right in the end. The difficulties we experience now – large as they may loom in our minds – are nothing compared with the glory that awaits us when this life is over. One of the people who heard Jesus say these words and was probably as nervous as anyone about going off on this mission was Peter. But listen to what he writes in his first letter – having no doubt been through a fair bit of what Jesus was talking about here:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:3-7)

And later on in the same letter he writes:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial that you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12,13)

And the underlying reason for all this – the bottom line, if you like – is that God loves you and cares for you. If the God who looks after the sparrow – the bird which was among the smallest and the cheapest that Jesus' listeners could imagine – knows every time one hits the ground, how much more is he going to look after you? God knows everything about you. He cares about every last detail of your life – even how many hairs there are on your head (an easier task in some cases than in others!). "*Do not be afraid.*" Why? Well, the Creator of the universe, the architect of salvation, the King of kings, Lord of lords, God above all other gods, cares for you. He actually considers you worth his love (v31).

Now, that's a pretty encouraging thing to hear from Jesus, whether you're going out into the big, bad world as a "*sheep among wolves*" or not. Whatever anyone else has told you about yourself, whatever your situations, however much you've been told or treated as if you're worthless or unlovely or insignificant, God thinks you're worth his love. That's part of the truth at the very heart of this Kingdom message – there is no-one whom God considers worthless. And if he is on your side, then no-one can really harm you at all. As St Paul writes, "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" (Romans 8:31).

So, Jesus is saying, it's not necessarily going to be easy, getting involved in this Kingdom stuff. Following Jesus is not a soft option – it's for people who like a challenge, people who are looking for adventure, people who are prepared to commit, people who want to make a difference, people who want

(as the Nike advertising hoarding at Wembley this week proclaimed) to “*make it matter*” – and there will be times when it really is tough. But take heart – “*Do not be afraid*” – God’s given you some pretty good natural gifts, he’s given you the amazing gift of his Holy Spirit, and he loves you to bits, so he’s not going to let you come to any harm in the long run, the eternal run. Let’s take what Jesus has to say seriously and go and get stuck in!

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The most common command in the Bible is "*Do not be afraid*". Jesus says it to his disciples three times – in *vv26,28,31* – alerting them, very probably, to the fact that there is some tough work to be done. And the context in which they are spoken shows that this mission will, indeed, be very difficult. Following Jesus is no picnic. If you want to be a follower of Jesus you will need commitment and endurance – and you'll need to take very seriously Jesus' command not to be afraid, because there will be plenty to make you fearful and anxious.

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And there is, of course, the Holy Spirit, who can help those who are struggling. If we are truly submitted to Jesus, really aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit, then God can speak through us if we are prepared to let him. There's a very powerful spiritual aspect to this and there is also an eternal aspect. One day everything will become clear and the followers of Jesus, whatever their experiences during their lives, will be vindicated. (Look at *1 Peter 1:3-7; 4:12,13*.)

And the underlying reason for all this is that God loves you and cares for you. He actually considers you worth his love (*v31*).

Questions for discussion

1. There has been much talk recently of increasing persecution of Christians in Britain. Do you think it's true? Why/why not? Have you experienced any persecution yourself?
2. We may not experience physical persecution, but what other pressures are there on us as followers of Jesus?
3. What do you understand by being "*as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves*"?
4. Do you have any personal examples to share of being given the right thing to say at the right time by the Holy Spirit?

5. What if Jesus really meant what he said? And what if we did it? Do you think we would experience more persecution?