

Sermon - Matthew 10: 24-39

When I first looked at our Gospel reading for today, I didn't feel very inspired.

At first glance, our reading seems rather grim – it talks about a time of division and conflict.

“...Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have come not to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in law against her mother in law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household...”

Let me begin by saying that this is a complicated reading. It's part of a larger conversation that Jesus shared with his disciples – about discipleship. And, I don't think we can fully understand the meaning of our reading without looking at the whole conversation. In chapter 9, we see Jesus move from place to place – we see him heal the sick and the suffering and he picks up some followers on the way. He heals a paralytic, he then calls Matthew to become a disciple, he restores the sight of two blind men and heals another who is mute. And, his followers continue to grow in number, as he moves from place to place. (This is all in chapter 9) And then, in Chapter 10, Jesus singles out 12 of his most faithful and trusted followers.

Jesus gathers them together and then gives them the power and the authority to do the same – to heal the sick and restore the broken – they are entrusted with the power that they saw for themselves in chapter 9. In verse 1, we're told that they were given authority over unclean spirits – to cast them out. They were also given authority to cure every disease and every sickness.

So, chapter 10 begins with this calling and commission. (Jesus encourages his followers to do what he did.) And then, Jesus talks to the disciples about the shape of this new ministry, out in the world (what it will look like).

He calls the disciples to step out boldly in faith – to go – to proclaim the good news. This is the message that they are called to proclaim – this is their good news – to tell the sick and the suffering that the kingdom has come near. The disciples are sent out with no gold or silver or copper in their belts – to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons.

And, Jesus predicts that this will be a very challenging ministry for the disciples (it was for him). He warns them that they will even be attacked for their beliefs. And, of course, some would say that this is still the case today.

So, this is the context – and it can help us to understand our reading today. In our Gospel, Jesus, points to a time of unavoidable conflict between two different viewpoints. Jesus reminds the disciples that their ministry will compete with many of the social structures and beliefs that contribute to life in the 1st century – it will compete with economic and social structures that tolerate neglect and abuse. And, again, some might well say that nothing really has changed.

The world of the 1st century was a difficult place, especially for the poor and the marginalised – it was a difficult place for the sick, the malnourished and the outsider – those living on the very edges of society.

And, of course, this is the heart of the matter (this is our context). In the call of the disciples (in chapter 10) – in the commission that the disciples received to proclaim that the kingdom is near – we see new priorities – new values.

Through the ministry of Jesus and his disciples we see a new and genuine concern for the poorest of the poor – we see a genuine care and concern for the outsider – the widow, the orphan and the refugee.

I think our Gospel message has some pretty far reaching political and social implications for us – as the people of God living here in Bayswater. In particular, we struggle with the knowledge that we don't really hold a privileged position in our culture anymore – our church is in decline. In a way, we now share more in common with the disciples of the 1st century – we speak from the edges of our society, not the centre. Just as the disciples were called to challenge the unjust social structures that existed in the 1st century, perhaps we are called to offer a similar ministry in our context today.

When Jesus talks about conflict within the family (son against father – daughter against mother), he's talking about the conflict that develops when two competing viewpoints come together. And, in a sense, we're being reminded today that we need to stand firm and maintain the faith when this happens – we're called to speak the truth and defend the cause of the most vulnerable, even when it's costly – even when it's not popular or welcome.

Our reading today reminds us that discipleship is a journey of faith that shapes our lives. It's not a job or an occupation – it's tied to who we are, as Christians.

For those first disciples, as they prepared to make their journey out into the world, Jesus offered some very wise advice – he reminded them that they couldn't pick and choose who was worthy.

Again, when we consider the social and political trends that shape our world – I think this reading has much to say. As I've said on many different occasions, the Church must have a voice – we proclaim that the kingdom is near to those who need to hear this message – we are called to give consideration to the poor and the needy – the neglected and the isolated – regardless of their nationality, religious convictions, income or sexual orientation. We are called to stand firm, even when it will be costly. And yes, there will be divisions – in our families, in our church and in our nation.

If I can, I'd like to finish by reading the verses from Matthew's gospel that follow on from our reading today. Jesus talks about the welcome that we offer – a welcome that is universal and uncompromising.

“...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...”

The Lord be with you.