

Year A

Matthew 10:24-39

There are some Scriptures that are easy to read and appealing to us. We like to dwell on these Scriptures because they have brought comfort to us; they have remained with us through the ups and downs of life and we might even have committed some of them to memory. There are other Scriptures that are so disturbing to us that we would really like never to read them again. They jar against our sensibilities. They disturb us because they do not fit with our

understanding of Christ and his kingdom and we find it much easier to try and forget about them than to wrestle with them. The Gospel text this morning is, for me, an example of one of these awkward Scriptures. Who wants to read about Jesus as the bringer of war? - who wants to live under the motivation of fear? - who wants to justify family breakdown as a fruit of following Christ? We want to reject all of these things and yet we find them all recorded in Matthew 10 as among the repercussions of following Christ.

High in the Andes mountains stands an enormous statue of Christ known as El Cristo de los Andes (The Christ of the Andes). It sits right on the border dividing Argentina from Chile, and was built to commemorate the resolution of boundary questions that had more than once threatened peaceful relationships between the nations. As long as the statue stands the nations have pledged there will be peace between Argentina and Chile. And so “Christ of the Andes” stands 14,000 feet above sea level, with one hand holding a cross and the other hand held up as though providing a blessing.

Ironically, shortly after the statue was erected as a symbol of mutual peace, controversy and bitterness broke out, as the statue of Christ faced Argentina, and so had its back turned towards Chile. The tension was defused by a Chilean journalist who humorously concluded it was only right that the statue face this way, for “the people of Argentina need more watching over than the Chileans.”

The Christ of the Andes statue is a reminder to us that Christ offers peace and reconciliation to those who are at war with God and to those at war with each other, and

that in effect, we are all like the Argentinians, we all need Christ watching over us.

Here in Matthew 10 Jesus was watching over his disciples. In last week's Matthew text, the disciples were described for the only time as apostles: those sent out by Christ with a specific task to accomplish. We reflected on the fact that the call that the apostles received is one which every Christian receives defined in the context in which we live today. We are disciples who are being sent out. But disciples we remain! A disciple is a follower or a learner. We are not

above our teacher. We are under his authority and we need to learn quickly. He is looking over us as he looks out for us and he uses disturbing words to shake us out of our complacency and to prepare us for the demanding environment in which we live.

But what do we make of the specifics recorded here? Jesus' assertions appear to be full of contradictions. The first challenge we face is what does it mean to be like Jesus? He is the master, the example and we are the followers, the learners.

Remember the beautiful hymn by Charles Wesley.

“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child;
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to Thee.

2 Lamb of God, I look to Thee;
Thou shalt my example be:
Thou art gentle, meek and mild;
Thou wast once a little child.

3 Fain I would be as Thou art;
Give me Thine obedient heart:
Thou art pitiful and kind;
Let me have Thy loving mind.

4 Loving Jesus, gentle Lamb,
In Thy gracious hands I am;

Make me, Saviour, what Thou art,

Live Thyself within my heart.

5 I shall then show forth Thy praise,

Serve Thee all my happy days;

Then the world shall always see

Christ, the Holy Child, in me.”¹

Now, that’s better, isn’t it? That’s the image of Jesus we wish to treasure and keep near us always. But it doesn’t all ring true and whilst we would wish that all of us would serve Christ all our happy days we have to acknowledge that happiness does not always travel with us. Also the gentle, Jesus, meek

¹ *The Church Hymnary Revised Edition* 1929 Oxford University Press No. 662

and mild image is a distortion of the full picture which our text in Matthew's Gospel makes abundantly clear. Here Jesus emphatically rejects his role as an inoffensive do-gooder. He is bringing a sword instead of peace. He is cutting through the sentimental mush that we can be tempted to present as practical morality. Jesus was no nice guy who went around as everyone's pal. They hated him so much that they accused him of being a servant of the devil. Why would you want to follow someone who threatened to wreck your family and how could a person who was offering a radical challenge to the

old order of things end up being strung up on a cross? These are all disturbing outcomes from a disturbing person and the disciples of old and ourselves, the latest disciples, are being called to follow that person! If we are following faithfully then we must prepare ourselves to receive some similar abuse. If we drift through life together without a hint of bother then we need to ask ourselves who we are following.

The second point of tension regards the issue of fear: 'Do not be afraid' or 'be very afraid!' which is it to be?

One of the most majestic of all creatures is the tiger. For many years these big beautiful creatures have puzzled researchers. It seems that when tigers hunt they have a remarkable capacity for causing their prey to paralyse with fear, a capacity greater than any of the other big cats. As the tiger charges toward its hapless prey it lets out a spine chilling roar. Now you'd think this would be enough to cause the prey to turn and run for its life, but instead it often freezes and soon becomes tiger food.

At the turn of this century scientists at the Fauna Communication Research Institute in

North Carolina discovered why you're likely to freeze to the spot rather than run when the tiger charges. When the tiger roars it lets out sound waves that are audible – the ones that sound terrifying – and its also lets out sound at a frequency so low you can't hear it, but you can feel it. And so, as the tiger emerges from the undergrowth the flashing of its colours, the sound of its roar and the impact of the unheard but felt sound waves combine to provide an all out assault on your senses. The effect is that you are momentarily paralysed, so even though there may be time to avoid the tiger, you are

tricked into standing still long enough for the tiger to leap on you.

Our fears often operate in the same way. They paralyse us into inactivity, even when the real threat is not immediately upon us. Part of overcoming the challenges before us is to recognise the ability for our fear of what might happen to stop us from dealing well with the challenge.

I wonder if the disciples were frozen in their fear. Jesus told them not to be afraid. He spoke the Father's care for the two sparrows and how much more are they of value than the birds? Yet, on the other hand, he told

them that they had better fear him because he has the power of hell dangling before them. What were they to make of this? Frozen to the spot, unsure what to do next. I am very resistant to the preacher who would bring stories of hell to his or her people as a stick to beat them with. This is not the good news of the kingdom of God and there is no way in which a God who loves and cares for his children would desire to frighten and intimidate them. Yet, we live today in the shadow of ultimate realities that we know little about in our own experience. The kingdom of God is unfolding within the

context of the new birth pains of God's re-creation. All of this is ultimately good but it is not free of repercussions for God's people and we need to find a way to live not fearing the threats around us but instead cultivating a healthy respect for a God who holds all in his hands. This is not easy.

The third point of tension is probably the one which confuses us the most. What does Jesus have against families? Families are under severe pressure in our modern times and we would hope to find reassuringly positive encouragement for the family from Jesus. But we don't find it here. Jesus was

no champion of family values. He was the champion of kingdom values. If the family unit is supportive of the kingdom then there is no clash of interests. However, for the early Christians, there were often clashes with family members which drove people to make a very difficult decision. This was the reality for the early Church community. What matters most, the old order, or the new family of God, following a radical master? So would Jesus recommend that his disciples abandon their families to follow his lead? I don't think so but I think he would identify the terrible conflict that arises when those

we love do not understand the cause that motivates our lives. Jesus will not let us sit easily with this. He makes it very uncomfortable for us to sit in the place of contradiction but in so doing he compels us to face the situation and to try and find an answer to it - that's practical Christianity: tough and testing.

We don't like this Gospel reading, do we? But there it is, staring out at us after 2000 or so years. Challenging us to think again if we thought all of this was straightforward. May God help us as we seek to take it on

board and to live as true disciples of Jesus
Christ.