

To Fear and Not to Fear

In the name of him who set us free from sin, dear friends in Christ: In last week's Gospel, we heard how the Lord Jesus, in order to multiply the effect and reach of his ministry and also to give his disciples some much needed practical experience, empowered the twelve to cast out demons and perform healing miracles, and how he then sent them out in pairs to proclaim to the people of Israel the imminent coming of the kingdom of heaven. This happened fairly early into the three-year ministry of our Lord, likely near the end of the first year. It was a time when his popularity was still very much on the rise. He hadn't yet had any major confrontations with the religious authorities who would eventually see him as a threat and plot (successfully) to destroy him. In other words, it was a relatively safe time to send out these disciples on their practice mission. They were going to be emissaries of Jesus in a time when pretty much everyone was fascinated by him and wanted to learn more.

But Jesus knew it wouldn't always be that way. He knew that the time would soon come when his name and his Gospel message would become extremely divisive, that it would set people at odds even to the point of hatred and violence, and that those who carried out ministry in his name would become themselves objects of scorn and abuse by his enemies. And so what we have in today's Gospel reading are some of the warning instructions that Jesus gives the twelve before sending them out. He wants them to know in advance of the conflict and hostility they will later have to face.

This is important because when that time comes, he doesn't want them pulling a Jeremiah. That's what we have in today's Old Testament lesson. In it the prophet complains bitterly to the Lord that he misled him. "You didn't tell me when I signed on to be your prophet that people would badmouth me, make fun of me, and plot to ruin me. You hid that part in the fine print of the contract." Well, that's not exactly true; but that's the way Jeremiah felt. It might be natural to assume that if the Lord calls you and appoints you to be his spokesman that everything will come up roses for you. After all, you're on God's side: the winning team. What can go wrong?

The answer is plenty. And the reason is sin – humankind's rebellion against God. Those who proclaim the good news of the kingdom and God's saving grace in Christ must first show why the good news *is* good news. That is to say, they must first deliver the bad news: the bad news that their hearers have sinned in thought, word, and deed, that they are rightly under the wrath and condemnation of God, and that they need to repent. And sinners, being sinners, don't like to hear that. Not the person living an openly scandalous life, indulging in every excess and vice, who just wants to be left alone to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin; not the most scrupulously pious and outwardly godly person who is indignant at the suggestion that there's any sin in his life; from both ends of the spectrum and from all points in between, no one likes being accused and revealed to be a sinner. No one wants to repent. No one properly fears the Lord and his righteous judgment. Instead we've got excuses. We can explain why our faults aren't really our fault. We can point to the good things we've done that the Lord ought to be tickled pink about. So then when someone comes along and tries to upset the secure, comfortable, and nearly perfect image we've constructed of ourselves with threats of God's judgment against our sin, we go into defensive mode to protect ourselves. Or, just as often, we go into attack mode. We shoot the messenger.

That's what happened to Jeremiah – and to all of the prophets of God before and after him. Jesus knew that it would happen to his disciples too. And so in today's text he's warning them in advance, while things are still relatively safe, that the day is coming when the faith they confess and the message they proclaim will be met with resentment and animosity.

“A disciple is not above his teacher” he tells them. If you want to know how they're going to treat you, pay close attention to how they treat me. And exactly how they'd do that would reveal itself in the course of Jesus' ministry. Again, at this point he's still widely held in esteem, but there is a rising tide of opposition out there that would soon become a storm. He speaks of himself being called Beelzebul, the prince of the demons. It's likely in reference to the charge that would later be made that when he casts out unclean spirits he does it using demonic power – as if he held high rank among the demons. Why in the world demons would want to free people from their control defies logic, but then those who oppose the Lord and his saving work don't really have rationality on their side to begin with. If someone is looking to find fault, they will.

Jesus is warning his disciples how it will be for them. If they say things like that about me, how much more will they malign you? It's how it begins: with attacks on your good name. They'll attempt to ruin your reputation. They'll misinterpret your motives and cast them in the worst light. They'll trump up false charges against you. They'll spread the word so that people you haven't even met will already despise you. And don't let anyone kid you: that hurts. We say in that expression about sticks and stones that words will never hurt, but it's a lie. I expect that everyone here can remember something someone said falsely or with excessive meanness way back when that still hurts now.

It begins with verbal attacks, but it doesn't end there. Hateful words lead to hateful actions. When the enemy can't destroy you with their words, they'll turn to physical violence. For Jeremiah, it meant being put in prison. For Jesus it meant the cross. And too, as we know, it meant persecution and imprisonment for the apostles and a violent death for all but one of them.

Jesus is telling his disciples (and us) this is how it will be. This is what you signed on for: the hatred of the world, the brutal opposition of the enemies of God, and cruel, painful death. All of which sounds pretty frightening and scary. And you might think Jesus would say so, but he doesn't. Instead he says not to fear any of that. Don't let it bother you at all. Why? It's because at the end of the day, they can't do you any lasting harm. The worst they can do is to destroy your body in this life. Got news for you: your body in this life is going to be destroyed anyway, one way or another. And then what? Your spirit goes to be with the Lord. And on the last day, he'll raise up your body again – the new and improved version that will never die. You lose nothing. You gain everything. So have no fear of them.

The one you ought to fear is the Lord. You ought to fear offending him. You ought to fear denying him through your words and actions. If you have him, you have everything. If you lose him, you lose everything. If you deny him, refuse to confess him, he'll deny you. Be afraid of that.

And consider: nothing can happen to you that isn't in his care and keeping. In the early morning Bible study, we're going through the book of Daniel. The major theme of it is the Lord's absolute control of world history. He's the one who raises empires and nations, kings and rulers; and he's the one who causes them to decline and fade away. He commands the warp

and woof of the whole thing. And everything he does is for the good of his people and for their ultimate salvation.

That's true. But it isn't just the big sweeps of world events that the Lord commands, it's also all the tiny things. That's what Jesus is emphasizing in today's lesson. He's got the whole world in his hand, yes; but he's also holding each and every little sparrow in the field. Not one of them falls without his consent.

And if he's concerned with each and every little bird, how much more do you think he's concerned with you? Even the hairs on your head are numbered, Jesus says. And look, I'm not sure how many birds any one of us is worth to him, but this I do know: God didn't send his Son to die for sparrows. He sent his Son to suffer and die for you and for your salvation. That's how much he loves and cares for you.

Okay. So how do we apply this? You are not one of the twelve disciples. You haven't been empowered by Jesus to perform miracles of healing. And with the exception of a few, you haven't been given as your primary vocation the proclamation of the Gospel. Furthermore, you are blessed to live in a nation that allows for freedom of religion. The chances of you being called upon to suffer death for your faith in Jesus are quite remote. The same cannot be said for fellow Christians in other parts of the world.

But by God's grace and calling, you *are* a disciple of Jesus. And you are called to confess him by your words and actions in all of your vocations – not just in the big things, but also in the little things. And it's in the seemingly little things where your faith in Christ and your biblical morality are increasingly coming into conflict with our society and culture at large that you are most likely to fear the anger and hostility of the world and so be tempted to deny the truth: like when a pregnant friend tells you that her developing baby has a defect of some kind – that it's debilitating and will cost the family hundreds of thousands, and she's thinking about getting an abortion, or when a friend or your son or daughter tells you they've decided to move in with someone to whom they aren't married, or when someone you know says something like, "I think all religions are pretty much the same. They all lead to the same place. God knows what's in your heart. That's all that matters". At such times (and a thousand others like them) you are being called upon to confess the truth – the truth that you know is going to make someone angry, likely to provoke them to accuse you of being intolerant and judgmental, and likely to strain or even to break a relationship with that person and perhaps others.

The question is this: whom will you fear offending, God or that person? Will you deny the truth for fear of what people might do? To do so, is to deny Christ. And for that, Christ will deny you. Be afraid of *that*. Fear him who can destroy both your soul and body in hell.

And look: I expect that we've all done this, likely many times. It's a sin, yes; but it's not unforgiveable – as the apostle Peter discovered. But as a sin, it needs to be repented of. If it's ongoing, it needs to be stopped. And receiving God's forgiveness for the sake of his Son, and the power of his Holy Spirit, let us resolve fear God rather than people, and to confess Christ Jesus our Lord in *all* that we say and do. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!