

**Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2020**

**(third after Pentecost A)**

**Talks**

Matthew 10: 26-34

## **Reflection one: Every hair on your head**

> The shops have all re-opened this week, but as far as I am aware, hairdressers have not yet.

> Comparing our various new, rather longer than usual hairstyles, has become a popular topic of conversation recently as many of us wait for a haircut.

> As you can see, mine is getting quite curly and unruly – I describe it as ‘naturally scruffy!’

> I don’t mind, because I don’t have to look at it. But having longer hair tickles my ears which is really annoying. I tried cutting some back with my beard trimmer – but it didn’t go well at all. At least I didn’t end up as badly off as some photos I have seen on the internet of DIY haircuts!

> Its amazing stuff hair – when I looked it up, I was amazed that we are all born with about 100,000 hair follicles on our heads. Some of us now have rather fewer – but even so it puts into context just how deeply, carefully and attentively God loves us.

> We know this because Jesus told His disciples that; “even the hairs of your head are all counted.”

> We’ll be thinking about the passage in Matthew’s Gospel, where the quote comes from in a little while.

> But let us never forget just how much God loves, not only us, but our sisters and brothers right across the world too.

## Reflection two: Do not be afraid

> Tom Wright thinks that “do not be afraid” is the most frequent commandment in the Bible. I can’t be sure about that, but when I carried out a search online, *Bible Gateway* informs me that this phrase appears 78 times in the Bible, with 16 of them in the Gospels.

> Our reading for today contains one of those occurrences and a couple of other similar reassurances by Jesus.

> He was talking to the 12 Apostles before sending them off to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6) to proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” as well as to heal people.

> The twelve were:

“Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>4</sup> Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot.” (Matt 10: 2).

> The theme of reassuring people called into God’s service runs throughout the Bible and begins in Genesis with Abraham who we thought about last week; “the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’” (Gen 15:1)

> Another example can be found in Isaiah 41:

<sup>8</sup> But you, Israel, my servant,  
    Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
    the offspring of Abraham, my friend;  
<sup>9</sup> you whom I took from the ends of the earth,  
    and called from its farthest corners,  
saying to you, ‘You are my servant,  
    I have chosen you and not cast you off’;  
<sup>10</sup> do not fear, for I am with you,  
    do not be afraid, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
    I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”

> There are two brief matters to note from this text:

1. That it isn’t clear who God is addressing, maybe one person, more likely a whole nation – or both even?

2. In verse 8 God is talking to people gathered “from the ends of the earth” – this is a global vision that transcends national and tribal boundaries. This is something I’ll come back to later on.

> But let’s return to Jesus talking to his apostles.

> You would have thought that the people Jesus was sending the disciples to – who had a Jewish heritage would all be delighted to hear the good news that the Kingdom of God has come near – so why the need to be told ‘do not be afraid’?

> The answer is simple; Jesus knows what people are like and he knows full-well that the apostles will meet opposition – which may even turn violent. He is being brutally honest with the twelve.

> As Commentator Stanley Saunders writes: “Faithful proclamation and practice of the Gospel inevitably puts disciples on a collision course with the powers of this world.”

> Personally, I find such a direct approach rather off-putting, but there is wisdom in what Jesus is doing – as Saunders says; “Why does Jesus highlight the horrors that await the disciples? Naming aloud the suffering to be endured and its causes is the first step in freeing them from the tenacious grip of fear.”

> As Jesus explains – the violence the apostles may (or will) face is bad, but it is a lesser fate than falling into the grip of evil that makes such good use of those who oppose the Gospel.

> Jesus then goes on to say; <sup>34</sup> ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.’

> It seems such a peculiar statement for the Prince of Peace to say – but he is just being realistic about some human behaviour. Those who build their prosperity at the expense of others, and those who exploit fear for their own ends will be deeply threatened by the Kingdom values; Love God, love your neighbour, help the poor and needy, seek justice - as the Psalmist wrote of God;

“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.” (89:14)

> The way of God’s love has always met with opposition – and continues to do so – we too need to hear that reassurance from Jesus “do not be afraid” because we are the ones given the honour to be the apostles of Jesus today.

> We live in worrying times – there are three matters of significant concern going on currently that have been making me anxious recently – I don’t know about you – but Covid 19 remains a serious threat, maybe more so now that restrictions are slowly being lifted for some. There are also the continuing concerns about the effect human activity is having on the global environment.

And in recent weeks the spectre of racism has been uncovered once more.

> It is this final point that I wish to comment on briefly as it has a direct relevance to our text today.

> Jesus says to the apostles: “nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known” (Matt 10: 26).

> This past week I was watching the BBC news channel and the person being interviewed was asked why the killing of George Floyd has sparked such a huge reaction? Her answer was simple – it was filmed.

> There have been many such killings, and sadly there has been another since – but the world being able to see such an awful event as the killing of George Floyd has uncovered, once again, the unacceptable injustice of racism that remains so endemic in one way or another right across the world.

> Its not just an American problem, our society has a long way to go as well, and the church is not immune to racism either. The uncovering of this injustice once more has shown us that there is much to do to combat the views that encourage denigration of people not like us, and to counteract those who exploit the fear the 'otherness' of people who might look a bit different or come from another country.

> In my view, it is an inherent part of God's Kingdom that all people are included and are valued equally. In Revelation we get a view of what God's Kingdom is like from the visions that John had. Here is one of them: (Rev 7)

"I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' <sup>11</sup> And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, <sup>12</sup> singing,

'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honour  
and power and might  
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

> Those gathered before God and Jesus are: "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" – so *all of humanity* is represented – no exclusions.

> That is what we are called to model in our churches that you have heard me describe before as little communities of God's Kingdom.

> As such we will stand out – and our instinctive holy habit of inclusion may draw opposition – but remember Jesus cares for each one of so deeply that every hair on our heads are counted.

> Jesus knows us and loves us that much.

> These are times when we may be feeling fearful for many reasons, and Jesus is well aware, that following Him is far from an easy ride.

> But as we continue in our discipleship, as we 'Walk the Way' let us hear loud and clear those words from Jesus; "Do not be afraid."

Amen