

Sermon June 25<sup>th</sup> 2017 - Matthew 10: 24-39; Jeremiah 20: 7-13; (Romans 6: 1-11)

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May I speak in the name of the one true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †

### [Part 1](#)

It was my elderly grandmother, who lived with us, who first taught me to pray, as a 4-year old, using those words of Charles Wesley:

*“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon this little child, pity my simplicity, suffer me to come to Thee.”*

That image of ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’ is deeply embedded in the popular imagination. But though not entirely untrue, it is a rather lop-sided *caricature* of Jesus – one that can serve as a kind of ‘comfort blanket’, which we can pull out and snuggle up to whenever we need reassurance, then tuck away and forget about until the next time.

Jesus’ words in our reading are shockingly at odds with that image, when he tells his disciples “do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth .... I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother .... one’s foes will be members of one’s own household”.

This makes uncomfortable listening! – not only are these the people we love most, but the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment tells us “honour your father and your mother”!

His words also seem at odds with what Jesus says on other occasions - earlier in Matthew, he tells his disciples “blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God”. In a passage interpreted as foretelling the coming of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah describes him as ‘the Prince of Peace’. Paul, in his letter to Roman Christians, tells them “if it is possible... live peaceably with all .... never avenge yourselves ... if your enemies are hungry feed them”.

So what’s going on?

### [Part 2](#)

Those troubling words are part of Jesus’ ‘missionary sermon’ when sending the disciples out to teach and heal, following his own example, in the villages of the Galilean countryside.

He’s preparing them for the reality that, though they might be well-received sometimes, following God’s ways (as embodied in Jesus’ own teaching and example) is *risky*. At best, it risks ridicule and rejection: Jesus’ opponents have accused him of drawing his power from ‘Beelzebul’, literally ‘the god of dung’ (an allusion to Satan). At worst, name-calling might easily turn into actual violence, as the events of Jesus’ own life would later show.

In telling them ‘*a disciple is not above the teacher*’, Jesus is preparing them for the risks *they’ll* face when they publicly *acknowledge* him and attempt to *live out* their faith.

### [Part 3](#)

Someone who suffered for his faith was the prophet Jeremiah, 600 years earlier.

Jeremiah was dismayed by the way his people and their rulers were turning *away* from God. Superstition and idol-worship had become widespread; God’s commandments were ignored; people were selfishly preoccupied with their own prosperity; corruption flourished; justice and the rule of law were neglected, the plight of the poor was disregarded.

Jeremiah warns of disaster – God is about to let the Babylonian empire conquer them, plunder Jerusalem and its Temple, and carry the people into captivity. A sensitive man, he hates having to speak out. In desperation, he decides to forget the Lord and no longer speak in his name, but God’s message is like a fire within him and he just can’t keep silent, although he knows he’ll suffer for speaking out. [And sure enough the chief officer of the Temple orders him to be beaten and put in chains overnight].

Poor Jeremiah *complains* to God: how he has to keep crying out warnings, how he’s ridiculed and scorned for proclaiming God’s message. That’s something I *love* about the OT – time and again we see how the Jewish people were prepared to *complain* to God, in a way that rather *shocks* us Anglicans. But it seems to me that this *frankness* is the measure of their genuinely intimate, *living, personal* relationship with God (who has previously indicated that he *cares* – he’s not aloof).

Jeremiah does suffer though – just after today’s reading, he *exclaims* ‘*curse the day that I was born!*’. Yet, despite this, he remains convinced that God is *with* him. Jeremiah has *faith* in God.

### [Part 4](#)

This ties in with Jesus’ words to his followers in our gospel reading. Living out *their* faith carries the risk of conflict, even with the people closest to them (I wonder how many of us have found the same?).

Nevertheless, Jesus insists that his followers shouldn’t *be afraid* (he emphasises this three times). And ultimately, they shouldn’t fear those who, at the very worst, can only kill the body but not the soul - because, Jesus reassures them (in what, I think, is one of the most tender passages in the gospels) that every one of us is *precious* to God:

*“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet none of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs on your head are all counted.*

*So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”* (Matt. 10: 29-31)

Despite its frailty, creation is *loved* by God, who cares and provides for it. Despite the trials and sorrows faced by God's creatures, the consistent message of the Bible is that ultimately (to borrow a phrase from that great mediaeval mystic Mother Julian of Norwich) 'all shall be well'.

This isn't just childish optimism, it's grounded in the nature of *God* himself.

### [Part 5](#)

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, invites us to reflect on the fact that there are two basic ways of *interacting with reality* – as "I and *It*", or as "I and *You*".

We can know about an *object*, e.g. a packet of cornflakes (its size, its colour) but it makes little sense to say we '*know*' it, and even less to say that it '*knows us*'. We relate to it as an "it" on which we may choose to act.

But an "*I-You*" encounter is different – there's more to another *person* than their size or colour. Encountering reality in terms of "I-You" is two-way, in some sense both parties 'know' (rather than just *know about*) the other – and up to a point the encounter depends on a willingness by both of them to be *known by* the other. For example: Imagine walking your dog along the Hayling Billy footpath. You encounter other walkers whom you don't know. You *may* simply pass each other without eye-contact – they're just part of the scenery, as you are for them (an "I-it" encounter). *Alternatively*, you might make eye-contact and say '*good morning*', although you've never met before .... and occasionally this might even give rise to a conversation.

This brings us to the core of the Christian understanding of *God*. God is not an "*It*", God is a "*You*" - he wants *each* of us to know him (not just to know things *about* him), and he wants us to *realise* that he *knows us*. When Christians (and Jews) talk about believing in God we don't just mean some *abstract force*, but a personal God who *communicates* with human beings, who called Abraham and prophets like Jeremiah, and who *continues* to call people today – a God who's able to enter into a *relationship* with human beings. What's more, the gospels repeatedly affirm his *love* for us.

This love reaches a climax in the life and death of *Jesus*. In Jesus, the creator God, the *foundation* of everything that exists, chose to *empty himself* and share our humanity so that we might be '*healed*' of all those things that threaten to *separate* us from him (and from each other).

The closest our limited human minds (and hearts) can come to grasping the nature of Almighty God is to consider *Jesus* – quite simply '*God is as he is in Jesus*'.

Faith isn't a just matter of accumulating *knowledge about* God – it's about deepening the quality of our *relationship* with him. Just as two *people* might strengthen their friendship by keeping in *contact, doing* things together, *sharing* experiences, so too our *relationship with God* will be strengthened if we make a point of *involving* God while we go about our daily lives, *frankly sharing* with him our thankfulness, our fears, our frustrations, our resentments even, our hopes (however trivial some of these might seem) - and at the same time by being *open* to his *response*, whatever form this might take.

Let's do it!

*Amen* †