



**Sermon preached by Richard Lewney on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2023**

**Readings:** Jeremiah 20.7-13; Matthew 10.24-39; Romans 6:1b-11

## **A tough call**

Jesus said:

‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come 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.’

There are times when I think that, before I accept a preaching engagement, I really ought to check what the gospel lectionary reading is going to be! But where would be the fun in that? Here’s Scripture to wrestle with: let’s see where it takes us.

We’ll start with our Jeremiah reading.

‘I have become a laughing stock all day long; everyone mocks me. ... [W]hen I speak, I must cry out ... “Violence and destruction!” ... I hear many whispering: “Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!” All my close friends are watching for me to stumble.’

The prophet Jeremiah had, as they say, a tough gig. He’s called to speak God’s word into a time of national crisis, with the threat of Babylonian invasion and domination. He’s called to challenge the religious and political leaders, at a time when the right to unfettered free speech was not the norm. More Xi’s China than Macron’s France, let’s say. And he’s young, in a culture in which respect for elders is deeply important, so who is he to tell them off? Indeed, you may remember that he tries to recuse himself in the dialogue he has with God recorded in Jeremiah 1. God says:

‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’

Then Jeremiah says:

‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.’

So God doesn’t let him off the hook. The Babylonians take Jerusalem and deport some leading citizens, including Daniel. Jeremiah writes to them in Babylon. It’s not great news. He tells them not to expect an early return from exile but rather to settle in for the long haul. To seek the welfare of the pagan city that he says is now their home. Meanwhile, Judah’s king continues to make intrigue with Egypt culminating in rebellion, and Jerusalem is put under a long siege by the Babylonians. During that time, just when there is a patriotic imperative to maintain morale within the city, Jeremiah’s job is to tell his people that resistance is useless, defeat is inevitable and they should give themselves up. You can imagine the tabloid headlines: ‘Traitor’, ‘Enemy of the people’. He’s beaten up and thrown into jail.

How does Jeremiah respond to his calling? He complains:

whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.

But if I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

He's in a bind. To speak is to invite violent opposition. To remain silent is to try to bottle up a volcano.

Of course, there are some passages of hope in Jeremiah, the ones we like to read, but for the most part the book is one long, well, jeremiad. No boosterism here. So, Jeremiah's call involved great risk and sacrifice.

Our gospel reading picks up where last week's reading left off. You may remember that Jesus sent the twelve out to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, warning them that, like Jeremiah, their testimony will not be welcomed by those in authority: they will face persecution. And, in words that echo those of God to Jeremiah at the time of his call, Jesus assures them that they do not need to worry about what they will say when they are arrested: the Spirit will give them the words when they need them. The passage evidently points to the time a few decades later when missionaries from the early church were taking the message of Jesus' resurrection out in all directions from Palestine and having a hard time of it.

In today's reading, Jesus continues to warn his followers about what they will face. Just as Jesus was, literally, demonised by the religious authorities, slandered and maligned, so will the disciples be. Just as Jesus was betrayed by a close follower and abandoned by his friends, so they will be. And to locate what they must now experience within the long-awaited working out of God's salvation plan, Jesus cites the vision of the prophet Micah about divided families in a time of crisis. Just as Jesus must take up his cross, so they must take up theirs. Just as Jesus lays down his life and is resurrected, so they must lose their life in order to find it.

Because it's time to go public with the gospel. What's been covered must be uncovered. What's been in the dark must be illuminated. What's been hush hush must be declared loud and clear. What was underground must now be surfaced. What's been on the margins must now move centre stage. And that's dangerous. They have the promise of the Spirit's accompaniment and of God's deep care for them, even the hairs on their head, but they will be putting themselves in harm's way. That's the sense in which it's not peace, but rather the sword.

As with Jeremiah, their call involves great risk and sacrifice.

So we see the pattern in our two readings. Prophet and disciples called to speak up when speaking up is not safe, to confront authoritarian power with news that it can't bear to hear. And that call is uncomfortable, almost unbearable. It's a call to risk giving up what they cannot keep in the hope of gaining what they cannot lose.

But how do we connect what Jesus says with our experience today?

Well, of course for some Christians in some parts of the world today, living the faith openly and sharing it with others are dangerous actions, liable to attract the attention of oppressive authorities. I think of the stories of Iranian Christians I've met recently about the intolerance of the regime for anyone converting to Christianity. For some Christians in some parts of the world, standing up for justice is a dangerous action. I think of Christians I know from Hong Kong, and the chorus 'Sing Alleluia to the Lord' which became the theme of protest against the stripping away of political freedoms. Jesus' words may confirm their sense of calling and

give them confidence in the Spirit's accompaniment. We may also hear in his words a call for us to demonstrate solidarity with them, however we can.

But what about our own witness? What about our own call?

Should we feel somehow guilty if our daily experience is not persecution; should we interpret that as evidence that we're not fulfilling our call to costly discipleship? Should we feel that our witness is validated if we succeed in getting a hostile reaction from others: ah, at last I've managed to disturb the peace, proving that I'm following in Jesus' footsteps?

If we think like that, I think we're getting things the wrong way round. Persecution and conflict are not *evidence that we're being faithful disciples*. They might somehow make us feel that we're doing the right thing, making an impression, causing a stir, but discipleship is not about *seeking* self-fulfilment. Surely it's the other way round: we're called to be faithful disciples and that means not shrinking from our calling for the sake of a quiet life. That may be something as small as a difficult conversation. It may be something that involves a more considerable sacrifice. It may be something that provokes a challenging reaction from a vested interest. We don't seek to provoke conflict so as to validate our discipleship, and we don't neglect our calling for fear of provoking conflict. We remember that 'whatever you're not changing, you're choosing'. We remember that in some settings 'silence is violence'. How can we keep from singing?

Because, as we know, discipleship is an 'all-in' thing. It's not a hobby. It's not confined to 'religious' activities. It's not a bill to be paid or some more tasks to fit in. It's all of me, 24/7, wherever God's placed me. We cannot, dare not, keep it in. For 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it'.