

**Today's sermon is brought to you by Bishop Tony**

**Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2020 - Gospel Matthew 10:26-33**

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In today's gospel Matthew shows how Jesus exhorts his disciples to face the hostility and intimidation that will come their way. They need not be afraid; they must remember their worth before God.

No individual, no group, no nation likes being pushed around. We all like to arrive at our decisions without being intimidated by a stronger party into submissive agreement. Just think about our world at this present time. How each country is facing the challenges of the coronavirus. Our how our own country is coping with negotiations about Brexit and future trade arrangements.

Even if a decision turns out to be a blunder, we tend to prefer the freedom to make our own mistakes over being forced to do what others judge to be right. When someone stands at your door and makes you an offer, while his armoured tanks take up position in your front garden to concentrate your attention, that is usually understood as an offer you can't refuse. But some people do refuse. And depending on your point of view, they are madcaps or martyrs.

When push comes to shove, we all react differently. We see it in the variety of reactions to the current pandemic.

In today's first reading Jeremiah refuses to be intimidated by terror from every side. That doesn't mean that the terror doesn't get to him – he is a prophet, not a robot – it means that he has no intention of allowing the terror to write his script and dictate who he is. Jeremiah has been abandoned by all his friends who now try to discredit him. He is thrown into prison for his preaching, and the army council threatens him with death if he doesn't change his tune. But Jeremiah refuses to be bullied into agreement because he believes that “the Lord is at my side, a mighty hero”. What keeps Jeremiah sane amidst all this persecution is the profound belief that God cares for him. And, less spiritually, the frank hope that God will clobber all his enemies in good time!

In today's Gospel Jesus appears in strong voice against intimidation. He does not disguise the truth that his disciples will be confronted by those who threaten, bully and intimidate others into submissive agreement. Jesus' advice is clear: not only does he want his disciples to refuse to submit to the merchants of death, he tells them not to be afraid of them: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”

The followers of Jesus are going to come face to face with the kind of violent intimidation that gives them an offer they can't refuse. Jesus tells them to refuse it. They have a real choice: disown Jesus and love, or profess him and face certain death. That is a fearful prospect. Yet Jesus says: “Do not be afraid.” How can the disciple *not* be afraid? What power is available to the disciple to overcome that fear?

Jesus argues that the Father cares deeply for the true disciple. He takes the example of a sparrow, which was regarded as almost worthless. Sparrows were sold in the marketplace as food for poor people – two for a penny, and five for two pennies. The fifth was thrown in for nothing. “Yet,” Jesus says, “*not one* falls to the ground without your Father knowing... So there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows.” Jesus’ point is very important: do not be afraid: “you are worth...” According to Jesus your own sense of worth is strong enough to overcome your sense of fear.

If you believe deep down that you are worthless, there is no point in defending anything. Anyone can intimidate a sparrow; anyone can intimidate those who regard themselves as worthless. But if you believe that *who you are* and *what you stand for* add up to some worth, then you will be willing to take on those who would rubbish you and your values. That is Jesus’ point. Your real worth before God is a more powerful force than your real fear of your persecutors. That sense of worth can outdistance the hate of all your oppressors. That is why Jeremiah and Jesus and all the Christian martyrs can face their persecutors with awesome courage: they all know that their true worth can never be killed. God’s everlasting love is the only real offer they can’t refuse.

The challenge to confess the name of Jesus is one that is issued to every generation and every Christian. The intimidation we experience may not be one of terror and persecution, but it can still be felt when we come face to face with those who resent the Gospel. When it comes to Christian values, the raised eyebrow and the scornful silence can be ways of trying to brow-beat the believer. Eyebrow-raising and crucifixion are different only in the degree to which they display disapproval.

We can face any kind of intimidation but only when we believe in our worth before God. Our real sense of worth can overcome our real fear. Fears that we feel about the present crisis. Remember always that the Father offers us his everlasting love. When we keep that offer in mind, all the other offers begin to look very tacky indeed.