



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 18th June 2023, 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon: Sheep among wolves

12 I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades like grass? 13 You have forgotten the Lord, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction. But where is the fury of the oppressor? 14 The oppressed shall speedily be released; they shall not die and go down to the Pit, nor shall they lack bread. 15 For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the Lord of hosts is his name. 16 I have put my words in your mouth and hidden you in the shadow of my hand, stretching out the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth and saying to Zion, “You are my people.” **Isaiah 51:12-16**

16 “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues, 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the gentiles. 19 When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at that time, 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 Sibling will betray sibling to death and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, 22 and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 23 When they persecute you in this town, flee to the next, for truly I tell you, you will not have finished going through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. **Matthew 10:16-23**

So, we're continuing our journey in the gospel of Matthew today. Just to re-cap where we've been, Matthew 10 explores what it means for the church to be a missional people sent out into the world. A couple of weeks ago, we heard how Jesus called the twelve disciples to proclaim the kingdom of heaven come near and to work with Christ in realising the fruit of that kingdom. And so, we too are to go out, enhancing and increasing the life of those around us.

Last week, we reflected not so much on the content of the message, but the manner in which we are to go. We are to go vulnerably, as guests, putting ourselves at the mercy of our hosts. And in so doing, we break down the barriers of fear, suspicion, and the unknown, laying the foundation for new relationship and community.

And today, Matthew bluntly acknowledges how much following Jesus will cost. He tackles head on the reality of persecution, of estrangement from one's family and community, even of torture, imprisonment and death. For Matthew's audience in the early church, this would have been their reality.

It's fairly clear though, that the reality of the early church isn't our daily reality. For the most part in Aotearoa New Zealand, we are not persecuted for believing in Jesus. In fact, there was an article published a week ago that revealed data of hate crime committed in New Zealand. The data showed that you're much more statistically likely to be a victim of hate crime if you're Muslim or Jewish. For every 10,000 Jewish people in NZ, 57 were victims of violent crime because of their faith. That number is about 39 for Islam. For Christianity, it's 0.1 of every 10,000 Christians.

All that to say, that we need to hold this passage carefully. We are not the direct recipients of his words. Certainly, there are many places in the world where Matthew's words to the early church do accurately reflect the experiences of Christians today. As well as Muslims, Jews and people of other faiths.

And so, I think, in the first sense, there is a need for us simply to acknowledge that awful reality and to pray in solidarity with all people who are persecuted and victims of violent hate crime.

It's important to begin here, I think, because the persecution of the church is a dominant and recurring theme in the New Testament. And for Christians today, seeking to be faithful to the scriptures, it's easy for us to see ourselves in the image of the early church as a persecuted minority. We see ourselves as the victim. And the more we inhabit that identity, there's a danger that we become less and less self-critical.

At times, it might be true that Christians are unfairly prejudiced because of their faith. But at other times, the church has rightly been challenged on harmful beliefs, behaviours, or practices. And it's unhelpful for the church to simply dismiss that criticism as persecution. We end up in a kind of self-justifying bubble in which

criticism is perceived as persecution which is seen as a badge of honour for our faith. A really unhelpful feedback loop.

So I wanted to begin the sermon by warning us of the dangers of misusing this passage.

That being said, in a lesser sense, we might see something of our own experience in Matthew's words. It's fair to say, I think, that the dominant culture in New Zealand exhibits an aggressive secularism. "Secular" doesn't necessarily mean not religious. Rather it means that religion is a personal matter. It belongs to the private sphere. Out of sight, out of mind.

Any attempts to share openly about one's faith is often treated with suspicion, intolerance, even hostility. It means we're much more likely to talk enthusiastically about a tv show, a new technology, a gym, or even a political party than we are about our faith.

I wouldn't call this persecution, but it is intolerance and antipathy. Sharing openly about one's faith is often seen as socially unacceptable except in particular contexts.

And our passage today brings us face to face with that tension. On the one hand is the undeniable call of the disciples to go out into the world. On the other hand, the world we live in would rather we stayed at home thank you very much.

The tension is irresolvable because the Christian faith is not a private faith. It is a public faith. A faith that has a vision, a hope, not only for the church but for the world. A faith that follows Christ on his way of peace into the violent and hostile places of our world in the hope that God's love will heal and transform and renew all things. It's a servant faith. A faith that calls us beyond ourselves to serve and love others and to be part of God's new community, a new humanity. A faith that invites others to be part of that community too and that is not complete without them.

We live in that tension. And it is uncomfortable. I was asked by someone this week, "How do we share our faith in the current climate, which is often so inhospitable even hostile?"

It's a good question and one that I struggle with too. I've been asking that question to Matthew this week as I've sat with our passage. And I was struck by the imagery of sheep and wolves, and of doves and serpents. We are to be innocent as doves, Matthew tells us. Vulnerable sheep at the mercy of any predators.

What does it mean to be innocent as doves? I wonder if he's suggesting that we are not to assume that people will automatically be hostile to us sharing about our faith.

It's easy to assume, because of the aggressive secularism that dominates our public life, that everyone we encounter will automatically be hostile to us talking about our faith. But we shouldn't assume, I think Matthew would say. Be innocent as doves.

Think the best of people. If you're going to assume anything, assume they will welcome you with words of peace and open arms.

We might find that the narrative of aggressive secularism in New Zealand is a bit of a popular myth. Everyone thinks it's true, but the reality on the ground may actually be quite different.

Not only are we to be innocent as doves, but we are also to be vulnerable as sheep. Often, I think, people are rightly hostile towards Christians sharing about their faith because they assume that there is a hidden agenda to proselytise and convert. In other words, predatory, wolf-like behaviour. But we are not to be that. We are to go as guests, with no other agenda than to receive from our hosts, to learn about who they are and to share openly and vulnerably who we are.

And actually, in being open and vulnerable about our faith without any agenda to convert or proselytise, we are normalising conversations about faith and spirituality in a culture that doesn't know how to talk about faith and spirituality anymore. The importance of that can scarcely be overstated. Particularly, following the 2019 terrorist attacks in Christchurch.

We know religiously motivated hate crimes exist in New Zealand. We need to be talking about faith and spirituality, to normalise it, to break down the fear of the unknown and the hostility towards faith in the public sphere. We have a duty, not only to our persecuted Christian family, but to all people who are persecuted for their faith. Lest 2019 happens again. Heaven forbid.

So, we are to be innocent as doves and vulnerable as sheep in going out and talking about our faith.

But that's not all. Matthew also tells us to be wise as serpents, which means going out knowing that there are wolves out there. Let us be under no illusion. Not everyone will welcome you with open arms.

Nowhere is this clearer, I think, than in the evangelical atheism embodied in the likes of Richard Dawkins. Incidentally, once youtube figured out that I was interested in Christianity, I was inundated with countless video suggestions of debates pitting Christianity against atheism. Inevitably one intellectual would go up against another to fight it out for who has the most rational belief system.

It's clickbait. We all want to believe that we're not barking up the wrong tree. And so we get drawn in, embroiled in these debates. We've got something personal on the line. And there is a place for the academic defence of the Christian faith, often known as apologetics. There's no shortage of intellectually rigorous theology that engages critically with other disciplines in the sciences or humanities.

But I would argue that, for the most part, it's precisely that sort of combative wolf-like engagement that we're called to avoid. Why? Because we're not in the business of

proving the existence of God – God’s existence can’t be proven. Nor are we in the business of defending God through rational logic as if God needed to be defended.

No, we’re called to follow in faith. There’s something basically irrational about that. The whole problem with apologetic defences of faith is that the terms of the debate are often already set by an atheistic rationalism. As in our reading, it’s as if we’re hauled before the courts and demanded to answer their questions on their terms.

I’m mindful that when Jesus was brought before the courts and accused by Pontius Pilate, he remained silent, refusing to engage on Pilate’s terms. There’s wisdom here for us.

I think that often Christians are nervous about sharing their faith because they don’t have watertight answers to every thorny theological question that might be thrown at them. And to that, I think Matthew would say:

Be wise as serpents. Discern when there’s a genuine openness to talk about faith and when someone is simply out to expose you. And if it’s the latter, don’t feel obliged to continue the conversation. Move on. “Flee to the next town” as Matthew would say, for you are sheep among wolves.

And actually, rational arguments hardly ever convince anyone of anything. For all we human beings like to think we’re rational, we almost always make decisions based on our emotional reaction to something. Which is why throwing facts at someone isn’t going to change anything.

I would argue that all we can do – and all we’re called to do – is simply share our story. Share why your faith matters to you. Share how you ended up as a Christian. Share how Jesus has changed your life. Share honestly and openly about why you belong to the church in spite of its obvious flaws. Share your story and who you are in Jesus Christ with the vulnerability of sheep and innocence of doves. Thanks be to God.