

June 21st 2020 – Sermon for Second Sunday after Trinity

Rev Joshua Brocklesby, Curate at St Mary's Church, Watford

Bible Reading Romans 6: 1-11

Gospel Reading Matthew 10: 24-39

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy spirit, amen.

So, some of you who join our service regularly will know that I have a dog called Mo. He is coming up to 7 months old now and I've had him since he was a tiny puppy, he's now a very big puppy! And I have found it fascinating to watch him grow up. Everything this year for him has been a new experience, whether it's his first journey outside on a lead, the first time he experienced rain and the sights and sounds of a storm or even just meeting animals he'd never seen before, some of you may have seen the video at the end of a service which saw his excitement at meeting ducks for the first time! And in all these new experiences the one common feature is that Mo isn't sure what to do, he's a bit nervous because he's not sure if he should be afraid or if it's okay. Is he in danger or is he safe? He doesn't know because it's all completely new to him. But within all these new experiences, the only real constant Mo has is me. And so he will always turn around and look to make sure I'm there with him, as he knows I represent for him safety and security.

Just yesterday morning we had something of a breakthrough with Mo because due to lockdown he hasn't been able to have the puppy classes and interactions with other dogs he should have had. This has meant he's very nervous when he sees other dogs. He doesn't know what to do, so he tends to bark and try and run away behind me. But yesterday Mo was comfortable enough to go up to another dog and smell it, he was still nervous but he was on the lead and he knew I wasn't nervous and so he moved past his nerves and fear and made a new friend! Thankfully, the owner and dog were brilliant with Mo and also helped contribute to there being a calm atmosphere. But afterwards you could tell that Mo was not only excited about this new discovery that other dogs can be friends, but you could tell a huge weight of fear had been removed from him. So much so that just minutes later after a little bark to test the water, he was running up to another dog to say hello. Now there will need to be more careful and controlled meetings with other dogs for Mo to fully be at ease, and he will also have to deal at some point with meeting aggressive dogs. But for now, he is excited rather than afraid about meeting other dogs.

Now I'm sure some of you are wondering why I'm talking about my dog and what on earth this has to do with our gospel reading. But I think this illustrates something of what Jesus is trying to say in our passage from Matthew.

Because there are two important sides to what he is saying!

The first is not to be afraid. Like Mo we can be afraid of others, we can be afraid of what we do not see or know. There is a reason why most children go through a stage of being scared of the dark and it's because it removes their ability to see and know what is around us and we can't control it. We have no power over the dark by ourselves, we need a light to do that. And even a small night light can do much to calm a child's nerves about the dark. And that is the same for so much in life, we can be afraid of what we cannot see, what we do not know and what we cannot control! And that fear can hold us back in so many ways. It is fear that feeds racism. It is fear which feeds discrimination. It is fear which feeds violence. And yet Jesus here is saying something we all need to be reminded of.

He says why do you fear those who can only kill the body, why do you fear those who can only cause you harm here on earth!! The one you should fear is God whose power extends beyond our earthly life! So, do not be afraid of things of this earth, they are not worth your fear.

Now I know many Christians who unfortunately would like Jesus to stop here. They think we should fear God, like we would fear violent parent. They think that Jesus is saying here we should fear God because God can and will destroy some of us body and soul! It is a mind-set that speaks of another time. Where we were taught to live in fear of physical violence. There was a time when the way to train a dog like Mo was to use violence to make sure he feared me more than he feared anything else. The logic being if he did something wrong, he'd get hit and learn that if he did it again, he'd get hit again so he'd stop doing it. It's a horrible cycle of violence and pain and one which has no place in our understanding of what God is like. It's also one I can't understand at all, the thought of Mo being scared of me or me hurting him seems awful beyond measure.

So, to any who think we are to be afraid of God because what God can do to us. I am happy to say I think this is completely the wrong attitude to have and I can back it up with what Jesus says next because yes he does say the only thing we should really fear is God, but then he tells why that means we have nothing to fear at all!

Because he says, sparrows are pretty worthless really aren't they, they are not valued highly by the world, I mean you can buy two for a penny! Worthless! But even a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without God caring and valuing it! And that's a sparrow!

Did you know that all the hairs on your head are counted and known! Everything about you and who you are is known by God. God values you and cares for you so much that he is interested in every minute detail of who you are!

So do not be afraid, you are valuable beyond measure to God! The only thing to fear is God and yet God cares about you so much. So do not be afraid!

It's an amazing message. One which should give us immense comfort!

It means we do not have a God we should be afraid of and fear because of what God could do to us.

But instead a God who helps us to not be afraid of anything else because God cares for us immensely and is with us always.

It's like with Mo I don't want Mo to be scared of me, although logically he should be because I have control over all aspects of his life, like whether he eats or drinks. But I don't want him to be scared. Instead I want Mo to know how loved he is, how safe he is when I'm around, and how much a value and care for him. So that in the morning when I come downstairs, he continues to greet me with immense excitement and joy simply at my presence with him!

And if this is an example of this kind of care for a dog by a human. Then how much more do you think this is the case for our God towards us!

It's amazing! So let us not live in fear. We have a God who dispels all fear. We have a God who is light. And light dispels whatever darkness we are afraid of!

So we need to enter into the next thing Jesus says, knowing how valued we are.

Because Jesus then brings in a reality check. He says he did not come to bring peace to the earth but a sword! And he has come so that even family members might turn against each other! Perhaps we are confused by this. How can a God who values and cares for us come to bring a sword and turn us against each other. That doesn't seem very loving! But Jesus knows how divisive his message of love is. He knows how much pain and hurt comes through trying to get us to love each other. Earthly peace the peace Jesus did not come to bring. And we should note here, Jesus always makes a difference between his peace, godly peace and any form of earthly peace.

Earthly peace, the peace offered at the time by the Roman Empire – this was a peace based on oppression, subjugation, slavery and obedience towards a dictator. This is not the form of peace Jesus came to bring. It is not real peace. It is not godly peace. There is no justice in it. Jesus came to bring a just peace. And the desire for just peace, for a loving peace where all are free. That is divisive. That is enough to turn family members against each other.

Let me highlight this for you. I believe one example of this on a large scale is the current Black Lives Matter movement – some find these protests divisive. They think that to say Black lives Matter means we do think other lives matter. There are some so opposed – some so racist that they seek violence towards those who seek to protest non-violently. But the Black Lives Matter movement campaigns for a godly peace. Not one where a group of people have to suffer continually because of the colour of their skin, but one where they are valued and cherished and cared for as much as everyone else. The message Jesus brings can be divisive because many are too selfish to love the way Jesus asks us to! To love like God loves, valuing and cherishing everybody as if they were ourself!

Another example on a smaller scale is to look at how a family can be torn apart simply due to the desire to share love beyond a strict family unit! I remind you that Jesus claimed that all who follow him are his brothers, sisters and mothers. He extends out our concept of family to include all! Now this can be very divisive. Imagine how many families might be torn apart by the parents giving away much of an inheritance to charity rather than their direct children. Greed and selfishness towards this act of charity could lead to resentment and division within that family. It is why Jesus says we must love God more than our family, because it is only through the love of God we can love our family removed from selfishness.

The love of our family is not wrong, it should be cherished. But we can love in a way which is selfish. Love in a way where we want control and where we may not be prepared to do what is best for all. These moments can be painful but they bring life to all. Perhaps if my parents loved me and not God first. Then were I to be in an accident and be all but dead... I hope that because of my parents love of God and therefore their love of others, that they would be prepared if the time came to offer my organs so that others might live, rather than love me too much and be unprepared to let me go in time! There are reasons for why Jesus says what he says and there is a great challenge in it all. But behind it, as with everything about him is a desire to see love, a love for all to reign on this earth.

So in this passage from Matthew we have Jesus as he does most of the time, offering us immense comfort and hope and then challenging us to live in the light of this.

Are we to live in fear? Or are we to live boldly knowing God is with us and cares for us?

Are we to accept the peace the world offers, or are we to strive for the just peace which God offers?

Are we to love selfishly, or are we to love so that all might be live and be free?

These are big questions and they will mean and play out in our lives in many different ways. I cannot answer them for you. Neither can God. God loves and cares for you enough for you to always have the choice!

Amen