

Faith can unite and divide

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Faith can unite families and friends – it can also divide us. It can be a costly commitment. Today's Gospel calls us to explore the cost. Jesus tells his followers they must expect persecution and hardship as they follow his Way. Some of their families will divide because one member accepts and another rejects the Gospel. It won't be easy to bear. But the importance of the mission is so great that all this must be faced and endured. Where does all this come from, and what is it to us?

Matthew's record of the missionary teachings of Jesus – *the Mission Discourse* – was written down years after his ministry among us. It speaks out of a community struggling with the traumatic side of their missionary activities; family breakdowns, contempt from the mainstream community – accusations being misguided by some, and downright evil sect by others. The religious and civil authorities were united in their persecution of what they saw as a dangerous pop-up religion. They'd go for a believer's family if it meant quickly wiping out the group. Power still protects itself like that today.

We might find it hard to imagine some of the words in this passage ever having crossed the lips of gentle Jesus. Yet they're the sayings the community remembered when they were facing times of extreme stress. Many considered renouncing their faith altogether, apostasy. But it would have destroyed the morale of their little persecuted community. So they recalled and recorded the sayings in today's Gospel to galvanise their courage; sayings which helped them remember what Jesus himself had gone through to bring them the message

of the Kingdom.

They were disciples of the crucified one, they would follow his example. *A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ... if they've called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!* ... Followers of Jesus can live quiet, safe lives – not rock the boat; be left in peace to make our way. *Or* we can choose a life which responds to the extraordinary demands of Jesus' teaching and his lived example.

That's a life where we choose to love, to forgive, to heal, and to set captives free. Setting captives free is something daily more important as the number and misery of refugees around the world inexorably grows. Following Jesus is a life where we choose at every moment to be like him, confronting violence with peace, standing up for justice, mercy and faith, and by doing that, giving people a living, breathing introduction to the teachings of Jesus. Jesus calls us to answer to *his* authority; *not* that of our popular culture. Obeying him *will* mean a life of confrontation and danger both for us and our loved ones. Jesus calls us to risk this; to trust him.

²⁶ *... have no fear of them; [he says] for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.* ²⁷ *What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.* ²⁸ *Don't fear those who kill the body but can't kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

That may sound like living for a heavenly reward. But following Jesus is about the now; not just the hereafter. For Jesus' disciples to have betrayed the discovery they had made about him – to have gone silent about him – would've been unthinkable.

³² *“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.*

Not to have told the world that in *this* Jesus, they’d met their loving maker, they’d experienced the certainty of God’s love for them – they’d have denied others the chance to know the freedom that belonging to Jesus meant to them.

During the ministry of Jesus, he gave a huge focus to care for the outcast and the untouchable. These people are still with us in ever greater numbers; displaced people, refugees and homeless people. Much of today’s gospel resonates with these people’s experience? They’re sayings Matthew’s community remembered when they were facing times of extreme stress. Can we imagine discussing these words with someone in such a predicament? If that prospect chills us, can we ask ourselves what that’s about? And maybe can we consider directing our charitable giving this year to include support for people who are persecuted for their faith.