



Sunday Reflection

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 21 June 2020

Pentecost 3

while all Church worship in the buildings is suspended

On this 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, and the second Sunday after Trinity, we come together in worship. Let us remind ourselves of the opportunities we have been given to proclaim the Gospel to others, through our words and through our lives.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Matthew 10:34

An Illustration to set the scene

The French philosopher Pascal once said that there are two kinds of servant – those who go ahead with torches to light the way,



and those who come behind carrying the bags. St Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and Carmelite nun, was of the first kind. Her way was one of asceticism and sanctity, resulting in her most famous work *The Way of Perfection*. This "way", unfortunately, was not appreciated by her fellow sisters in the convent. When Teresa called for reform, their response was to throw

her out, and on one occasion she was turned out at night in the middle of a rainstorm. Dressed from head to toe in her coarse wool habit, she got into her donkey cart and was riding along when a wheel went into a ditch and the cart turned over,



dumping her into the mud. She sat there, in mud-soaked wool, looked up to heaven, and said, "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you don't have many."

Frustrated though she was, Teresa did not give up on God, even when her fellow sisters fought her every step of the way. She kept teaching what she knew to be the truth, and eventually she won the battle. Her desire was not to be right but to be faithful and obedient, and God rewarded her efforts.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples, three times he told them not to be afraid, because he knew the message would be unpopular. As in St Teresa's message, there were significant elements of sacrifice and self-denial. Jesus had been given a hard time so the disciples should expect the same treatment. Jesus had not come to bring tranquillity to the world but the opposite. Families would be divided, he predicted, and set against each other. His followers were to accept the demands and difficulties of the teaching and follow faithfully – or be judged accordingly. To gain true life would involve painful sacrifices and if that meant death – death of the body – that was an outcome preferable to the destruction of both body and soul in hell. Don't be afraid, the disciples were reminded; they were of more value than the common sparrow. In fact, they were

crucial to the mission. After Jesus' death, the good news of eternal life would be entrusted to the disciples to "proclaim from the housetops".

How can we reflect on the application to our lives

Six hundred years before Jesus sent out the disciples, God commissioned the prophet Jeremiah to deliver a similarly unpopular message. Initially he was steadfast, despite his dire forebodings being ridiculed by Israel's leaders. But when ridicule changed to retribution and Jeremiah was flogged and put in the stocks, his trust in God's protection evaporated. God had duped and misused him, he complained.

Similarly, when the going got tough, some of Jesus' disciples decided they had been misled as well. Why was the message so difficult? Why all this negative stuff, this harshness and division? Isn't the yoke supposed to be easy, the burden light? Don't you want, Lord, to make friends and influence people? Don't you appreciate that these days people get upset when they feel they are missing out on something, never mind losing their life? What is achieved by setting families at each other's throats? On and on the questions could go – and Christians today might find sympathy with some of them.

And then, gently, when the complaints are over, God brings followers back from all negative thinking. Back, possibly, to what Jeremiah called a "burning fire" moment. The realisation that God's claim on us – mentally, physically, spiritually – is beyond our power to resist. Back to reflecting that God does have a point. Why should we expect life to be cushy and cushioned from cradle to grave? God has important evangelising work for us to do, and, like Jeremiah and Teresa, we are to be the first kind of servant, those who go ahead with torches to light the way. When life gets difficult, God will be a "dread warrior" on our behalf.

God, as we are assured at the end of Matthew's Gospel, will be with us always.

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Matthew 10:34

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God's spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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