

## MOLESCROFT – TRINITY 3 – 2ND JULY 2017

This is not an easy set of readings, especially for a first sermon to a congregation you don't know! We have a brief, almost cryptic, passage from Matthew, a dense argument from St. Paul about sin and righteousness and a bit of that notoriously gloomy prophet, Jeremiah. I started preparing as I would always do by reading around the gospel to see where it fits into the wider story and things got worse!. This is the end of a long chapter in which Jesus is sending the disciples out for the first time, sometimes known as the Great Commission. It makes for uncomfortable, even shocking reading. Jesus warns his disciples that they will face persecution. He predicts betrayal, even amongst family members, and that *'you will be hated by all because of my name.'*

Then we think of Jesus as being the man of love, compassion and the peacemaker and healer but in this chapter he presents a very different side of himself,

*'Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother.'*

Moreover he demands from his disciples an absolute loyalty,

*‘Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.’*

We might very well be inclined to say, *‘This is not what I signed up to!’*

It is only then that we reach the short concluding passage that makes up our gospel reading this morning. So we have to read it in light of all these quite dire warnings that have gone before. And the central message is this,

*‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.’*

Jesus is already anticipating the time when he will no longer be physically with them, when the work of teaching, healing, even raising from the dead will pass from him to the disciples. In the power of the Holy Spirit they will do all that he has done and even more as they move out into the world. But it will be costly. Elsewhere he warns them that the servant is not greater than the master and

they mustn't expect to be treated any better than he is going to be treated.

Hopefully we will never find ourselves having to pay such a high price for our faith and our discipleship but we know that there are Christians in the world today who are facing just such dangers and even death for the sake of the gospel. But I believe that we, even in peaceful Molescroft and East Yorkshire face a real challenge in being Christians in our society. And I think we can understand something of the nature of our particular challenge from a close reading of this passage.

*'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'*

That is a remarkable statement. Jesus is not saying that when people encounter us, respond to us in our witness and service as Christians, that they are meeting and welcoming followers of his. He is saying that when they encounter us and respond to our Christian message they are meeting Jesus himself and, through Jesus, the one who sent him, namely God the Father.

I remember some years ago I had to organise a service at which the Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire was going to be present. Now when you have someone like that or a Mayor coming their office sends you a whole lot of paperwork about the protocol to be observed during the visit; where they must be seated, how they are to be addressed, whether they are expected to say anything during their visit, even down to the parking place or places that will be needed. When it is a Lord Lieutenant it is made very clear to you that he or she is to be welcomed and treated as if he or she were the Queen herself. In Matthew's terms, *'Whoever welcomes him or her welcomes the one who sent them.'* Equally, of course, on the other side, the holder of that office must never forget whose representative he or she is and must never do anything that could possibly devalue the office or damage the position of the Crown.

It is quite a thought then, a very real responsibility, that we, every one of us as Christians, hold a similar position in relation to Christ,

*'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'*

And when Jesus talks of 'welcoming' he is not just talking about a social welcome, a bed for the night or a meal, though that is included. He is talking about people welcoming or not welcoming the message he brings, welcoming or not welcoming the Word of God. And it is at that precise point that I think we meet the very particular challenge of our own time, the very particular likelihood of rejection, even persecution.

Time was, and it is in the memory of most of us here, that certain individuals and institutions were treated with automatic respect, even deference, and their pronouncements 'welcomed' to use Matthew's term again as being true and authoritative. That is simply no longer true. A change of culture, the tragic failures of institutions (just think in the last week alone of a council not coping in face of a crisis, of the Church's past failures to protect children or the latest developments in the on-going) and a general unwillingness to accept any absolute truths or the pronouncements of experts, have profoundly changed the setting in which the Church as an institutions and we as individuals operate. We have no automatic right to be heard or respected any more. Indeed often the opposite. In all areas of life, experts, including religious ones, are viewed with

suspicion and every opinion and belief is just as valid as the next one. And no good looking back nostalgically to what we may feel have been easier times to be a Christian or to be the Church. This is the world we live in and this is the world we must witness too.

I have no blueprint as to how that can best be done. But, returning finally to this morning's gospel, I do think there is one tiny clue as to how we might proceed. One of the things that has brought what Noel Coward once called a 'strange heaven out of the unbelievable hell' of recent events like the bomb in Manchester, the two terrorist attacks in London and the Grenfell Tower fire has been the extraordinary public response and the way communities have come together; the willingness of individuals to go to the aid of strangers sometimes at great personal risk. 'Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, none of these will lose their reward. 'I have come to serve and not to be served' said Jesus. So with us. It will be as servants and as a servant Church that we will be welcomed and will reveal to the world the true nature of Jesus Christ and the Father who sent him.