

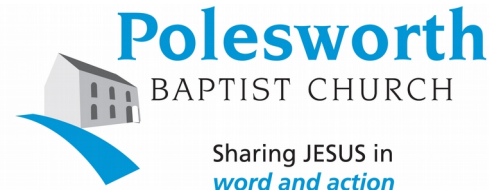
judgement standard of God for the life of His people: Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for His sake will find it.

Christ's earthly mission can be expressed this way. For the sake of honouring His Father, Christ gave up His heavenly life and entered human life. And He lived our life totally dedicated to serving His Father, even to the cross, suffering the bitterness of its agony in taking our sin upon Himself, being cut off from His Father, and even dying. And for that free obedience of love His Father raised Him to life, making Him both Lord and Christ, exalting Him to His right hand. Jesus lost His life for His Father's sake and in that losing found it. That's why He can say to us: whoever loses his life for His sake will find it.

How can we do this? The words are clear in the hearing of our ears but are they clear in the sight of our lives? Many of us have gladly received the coronavirus vaccine, which in its own living would harm, damage and even destroy our living. We can be immunised against this virulent sickness but we cannot be immunised against the violence of persecution, so long as this broken earth endures we will suffer rejection. We see that in Jesus' life. The hurt of the cross is deepened by the betrayal of His friends. Yet fellowship is His gift to the Church. We are not a collection of individuals we are a union in Christ, His body.

We've just begun a study of Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is open to any one to join. In his letter Paul urges them and us to conduct our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, standing firm in one spirit, contend-ing as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose us .. for ... it has been granted to them and us on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him...

Nicky Gumbel comments that Paul is reflecting on the unity which the gospel should bring to our relationships. We are united with a common faith in a hostile world. There will be opposition. There will be suffering and struggling. But we need not be frightened; we are not in it alone. An attack on one is an attack on all. The enemy will seek to divide us, but we must resist him and provide a united front to the world. We must fight division at all levels: as denominations, as congregations, as between organisations within a church, as small groups, as individuals. We must seek to be united in worship, in outreach, in endeavour, in values and purposes, in hearts and love. Then our communities, seeing that we are a people dedicated to living together in Christ will believe in Christ. Amen



2nd Sunday in Lent
28th February 2021

Reflecting on Matthew 10:32-42

I suggest, taking these verses as a whole, that Jesus is talking to both those in the church and those outside the church. Yet the centre of His word is the same: what happens to you in life and death depends on your response to Him.

As with last week let us also take His word in reverse order, and in the context of the Law and the Prophets, for the Old Testament is our base guide to God's expectations for those who are and are not His people

Therefore let's go back to Abraham, and God's response to those who are not His people and Genesis 18 when the Lord has just met with Abraham promising that next year he and Sarah would have their long awaited child. And in that context the Lord says 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? [For] Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.... God's purpose is to bless all people through Abraham's people.

Here the Lord shares his concern with Abraham, of an 'outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah [which] is so great and their sin so grievous that [He] will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached [Him]. If not, [He] will know.'

So begins an episode of great assurance, for God does not treat people according to rumour, gossip and hearsay, but according to the evidence of their lives, for He is the God of justice and a God of goodness. Our lives are own judgement. And what happens is that Abraham takes a stand before the Lord, praying for Sodom and Gomorrah. As nations who do not know the Lord, he asks: 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' A question that goes to the heart of the character of God.

What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?

And that is the point. The Lord is the Judge of all the earth who is committed to doing right. And Abraham presses the Lord in prayer to the understanding that if there are ten righteous people to be found there He will spare the city. But sadly there were not 10 righteous people.

What Jesus is telling us here, moving from the judgement of nations to the judgement of individuals, is that everything turns on people's responses to Him. Note the word: Anyone – not any believer but anyone - who welcomes His disciples welcomes Him, and anyone who welcomes Him welcomes the one who sent Him. A Christian represents Christ. Where you are, Christ is, and where Christ is, there is the Father. Therefore if someone welcomes you, they have welcomed the Son and the Father.

And that welcome does not generate condemning judgement but rewarding blessing.

Jesus speaks of a prophet's reward. He doesn't say what that is, but can it be a little thing? What He does say is those who welcome His people as people speaking God's word will receive a prophet's reward

What do you think is a righteous person's reward? Those who welcome Christ's people for being right-living, right-doing people will receive a righteous person's reward.

And this is not a matter of the welcome being hugely generous. If anyone does such a basic thing as welcoming a disciple with a cup of cold water, that person will be rewarded and cannot not lose it.

Might we be able to say from this that there are two basic ways Christ's people bless the world. One is by praying for the salvation of the nations, not vaguely but in specific ways. As Abraham said for the sake of 10. And also by going out on mission, here to Israel but later to the whole world. Going out offering His Kingdom peace by word greeting and by all kinds of actions of healing. As we offer His peace so will our offer reveal people's responses to Jesus, and He, who does not treat the righteous and the wicked alike, will reward those who welcome us.

Jesus says a word that is for everyone to hear: Whoever acknowledges Him before people, He will also acknowledge before that person before His Father in heaven. This also goes back deep into the Old Testament. You may have seen the film Chariots of Fire. Just before the gold medal 400 metres race one of the American athletes, Jackson Schulz, if memory is correct, comes over to Eric

Liddell, a devout Christian who runs for the glory of God and who refused to compete in the 100 metres for its final was on the Sabbath. He hands Liddell a piece of paper. In real life these events did not happen this way. But this is a drama intended to bring out the truth of real life. And the message of the paper was a quote from 1 Samuel c2 v30. In this chapter God is angry with Eli the priest because he has not corrected the scandalous actions of his priestly sons. Why, God asks Eli, do you honour your sons more than me? And then He declares: Far be it from me! echoing Abraham's words, those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained. These words are an assurance to Liddell of his victory just as they were words which condemned Eli; words which Jesus now makes His own: the standard of life is this: do you acknowledge Him before people? Even before your own family? Your eternal life turns on this.

And this is a real issue because the world is divided by its attitude to Jesus. They say the Brexit referendum divided families as well as the nation, but nations and families are even more divided by Jesus. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, but where people refuse the Lordship of Christ there will always be a pathway to conflict, a pathway that runs within nations, within communities and within families.

Family is for many people the most sacred circle of life. But what Jesus is telling us the church is that our love for Him is to take precedence over all our other loves, even the love of our families. And He knows how hard, and painful that will be, but that doesn't lead Him to tone down the message, instead He increases the challenge linking it to the cross. We speak of being called to live for Jesus but what Jesus is telling us here is that the church is called to die for Him. The cross is what we willingly suffer when God asks us to do what we don't want to do; yet because we yearn to honour God above all other concerns, His will becomes our desire.

Christ's words bear careful attention: whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Let's be honest these are not Sunday afternoon soothing words for a rose garden discipleship. Their message is very clear: the Church that is not willing to face rejection, hurt, and all kinds of persecution for Jesus is not worthy of Jesus. What do you do if you love someone whose life actions show they are not worthy of your love? We are sinners, and yet we know how to weigh the difference between what is worthy of our love and what is not. How much more so the Lord.

Jesus does not ask us to do what He was not willing to do. He declares the