

## ***Jesus said, "You are of more value than many sparrows."***

Let us pray together: O Lord, you have given us the Holy Scriptures for our instruction; grant us also the help of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your word in the depths of our hearts, and growing thereby in repentance and faith, may serve your eternal purpose for your creation and praise you in the light of the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen**

***Jesus said, "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* I wonder if you are taken aback or shocked by those words of Jesus the one whom we call at Christmas, the ***Prince of Peace*** (*Isaiah 9:6*), saying: ***"I have not come to bring peace, but a sword"***?

In today's Gospel reading Jesus shares very bluntly how following him cuts across and can affect our earthly family relationships: Jesus says ***"I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."*** *Matthew 10:35-37*

Jesus had some experience of this conflict in his own service of God the Father. When his teaching and healing ministry had taken off this happens: he and his followers were seeking a bit of rest and refreshment, but ***the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain (Jesus), for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."*** *Mark 3:20f* But when his mother and brothers turned up where Jesus had made his home they suffered another indignity, they could not get at him because of the crowds. And so ***standing outside, they sent to him and called him (and the) crowd sitting around him said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And (Jesus) replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."*** *Mark 3:31-35*

Even in our individualistic, western culture / we still find those words quite shocking, but in Jesus' day, and in many places throughout the world today, those words about family are quite scandalous! Today there are many who say that to follow Jesus is a betrayal of the loyalties that we should hold dear.

***Jesus said, "One's foes will be members of one's own household."*** Some of you in our churches here in West Devon will have experienced the reality of these words. In making a commitment to Jesus and in seeking to follow him you have faced, and continue to face, a negative reaction from your family and friends. They do not seem to understand how you can enter into a commitment that is more important than your commitment to them. They do not understand you taking on a commitment that at a stroke enlarges your friends and family from just them to many, many other people.

This is all the more frustrating when you know inside yourself that Jesus makes you more able to love them than you did before. They do not understand that Jesus actually calls you to be a better partner, a better child, a better parent than you ever were without him. Following Jesus gives us no excuse to use church or religious activities to neglect our families. I well remember a couple of significant times in my life seeking God's will for the future – the only clear answer I got was this: "Whatever happens, love your wife and children"!!

Jesus was highly critical of the religious leaders of his day who made up rules that excused them from caring for their parents (Mark 7:9-13). Some of us vicars are just as bad – pushing ourselves so hard "in the Lord's service" that we neglect our families. We need to remember that even when dying on the Cross Jesus had time to think about his mother's future and to provide for her.

***"One's foes will be members of one's own household."*** Whatever our experience, throughout the world many of our brothers and sisters in Christ experience this reality to the extreme – cast out by their family

and treated as dead because of their choice to follow Jesus – driven from their homes, deprived of their livelihood, persecuted and even killed *by their own families* because of their new found faith.

This is just one story amongst many shared by Open Doors, an organisation that supports persecuted Christians: *Susan Ithungu a young believer from Uganda who suffered life-changing injuries after being severely mistreated by her father for leaving Islam, is doing 'remarkably well' following two separate operations in (a) few months. Susan was found severely malnourished and suffering from poor muscle development and bone fractures after her father locked her in a room without food and water for converting from Islam to Christianity.*

*Despite this, she said, "I cannot leave Jesus. I decided not to leave Him because He has given me eternal life and even if I died there [in that room], I was sure that I would go to Him. When they opened the door [of the room where I was kept for three months], I felt peace and I knew that God had sent me help."*

*Since then Susan has had many operations to enable her to walk, her surgery being sponsored by Open Doors. The latest operations took place in Kenya ... and Susan is doing well. The long road to recovery means that she is missing the school year but the possibility of walking again without difficulty gives her hope. She is emphatic that she wants to be able to walk, go to school and study to be a doctor. "I thank God very much that I am still alive. He protected my life."*

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/resources/prayer/testimonies/>

Not all stories end so positively here on earth, like that of Susan – or like that of Jesus own mother and brothers. On the day of Pentecost they are found along with the Apostles, **constantly devoting themselves to prayer** (Acts 1:14). Jesus' family had changed their mind and had become his followers.



Whatever the struggles we are going through in order to follow Jesus, here in West Devon, or wherever we are, this is Jesus' promise: ***Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*** Matthew 10:29-31.

Whatever happens we are assured that God loves us and will take care of us.

If you, through no choice of your own, are not given the opportunity to love your family and friends or are separated from them – to you Jesus says this: ***everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.*** Matthew 19:29

Let us pray:

In the silence let us lift up to God our family and our friends ... thank you Lord for those you give to us to love ... thank for those who have supported us in our faith and have helped us during lock-down.

In the silence let us lift up to God all our sisters and brothers in Christ who are persecuted for their faith ... may they know God's presence and help.

In the silence let us prayer for those who have hurt us ... may they discover the love of Jesus which we have found.

In the silence let us lift up to God ourselves ... may God strengthen and help us when we face opposition or difficulties or testing.

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy of heaven but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

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