

Scenes on our TV screens in the last few weeks of angry protests and unrest illustrate areas of tension across the world. Arguably, we have uncomfortable truths to confront particularly around how we treat and have treated the most vulnerable in society. Those who campaign for the marginalised and against the systems that create inequality have often in the past been ridiculed for doing so. I note that given the causes as well as the solutions to global and local inequalities are complex; there is perhaps an ongoing degree of fear surrounding those called to resolve or ameliorate the problems campaigners have highlighted.

Both of our readings today speak of people in leadership looking forward in fear. Jeremiah laments that in speaking truth to power he has been ridiculed and punished. Whilst he knows that God's word is stronger than those that persecute him, he questions aloud whether he should continue in his prophetic calling. He soon dismisses his doubts describing God's words as burning within him. By the end of the reading he recommits to praising God and continuing his work. In our Gospel reading set some 600 years later, Jesus warns his twelve disciples that they too will face many trials. Earlier in the chapter he has instructed them go out to Israel and proclaim that his Kingdom is near. They are to heal, cleanse and drive out demons in his name. I can only imagine what a daunting prospect that must have seemed for them.

Jesus the Prince of Peace, warns that the full extent of his peace will only be achieved when the forces of evil have been overcome and The Kingdom fulfilled. Until then, there will be battles including public ridicule, being disowned, possibly by one's own family and a need to "take up the cross." Whilst this is a phrase we might use metaphorically, for Jesus and many of the early church leaders, the cross described the violent martyrdom that awaited them. It is fair to say that the future facing The Apostles was not an entirely attractive prospect!

There are some parallels to the scene described in Matthew's Gospel and our moving into a so called "new-normal" after our national lockdown. As we emerge as individuals, families, and the church, we have much to think about and potentially to fear. As Christians how we conduct ourselves should be based on biblical principles; yet how to love our neighbour in the context of so many new rules to follow is especially daunting. What are we permitted to do? Who may we meet? Where might we go and how can we stay safe? As we decide, we will be weighing up (often contradictory) information and applying what we learn to our own circumstances. How we might discern what is necessary, too risky or for others to deal with adds to our confusion. There remain so many unknowns meaning that Jesus' Gospel message that God is in the details of our lives and to trust in his care, has perhaps never felt more relevant.

Whilst we have (mainly) remained safe through this pandemic by staying at home and acting with great caution as advised by our government; much uncertainty still lies ahead for us. An economic crash is predicted which is likely to have far-reaching consequences. The long-term physical impacts of those who have been infected by Covid and survived is largely unknown; and the mental health aspects of illness, large scale grief and extended isolation can only be speculated about for the moment. We will be tested in many ways in the weeks and months ahead. So where might we start? If we follow the example from today's Gospel reading, we should perhaps start with a small step. From the twelve men sent on a mission in Matthew chapter 10, the world today has over two billion Christians. The sword of God's word described in verse 34 has fought much opposition yet has proved itself as sharp and effective as Jesus promised. In a world that is increasingly secular and cynical, it is easy to forget just how powerful the Christian message can be. For that power to continue we each need to play our part in acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. We can do that through our personal choices and our political behaviour. As we consider the recent protests, in our own way, we may each need to reflect, repent, and repair where we have fallen short. We will also need to make positive choices about which aspects of our life we might change for a greater good. This will at times be an uncomfortable process.

In Psalm 86 we are reminded that we can call on God in our distress, that he will be merciful and give his servants strength. With so many unknowns, the invitation to rest in a God who is greater than anything our fallen world can create is reassuring. May we all this day, turn away from ourselves and towards God. May we stay safe; trust in our merciful creator and follow the words and example of our Lord Jesus Christ who came to save us all.

Amen.