

Romans 6. 1b – 11
Matthew 10. 24 – 39

Fr Alex

Today's Gospel continues the instructions that Jesus gives to his disciples after sending them out ahead of him.

We heard last week of how he called them together; and that it was a kind of turning point for them in their journey with Jesus. Having followed him and learned from him, he now sends them out to share his good news with all they meet.

But it doesn't sound much like good news, does it. Jesus starts by effectively saying, "You've seen how badly they treat me; imagine how they're going to treat you."

And it gets worse towards the end of the passage. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." He then describes the strife that even close families will experience on account of this good news: sons against fathers, daughters against mothers, and so on.

I wonder how you feel, hearing those words this morning? Perhaps you have some experience of faith causing difficulties within your own family.

There are no easy answers in our faith, of course. But as a way in to Jesus' difficult words today, I'd like to encourage us to put ourselves, as far as we can, into the minds of those who would've heard St Matthew's Gospel for the first time.

As I've said before, it's important to remember that these Gospels were written in response to the lived experience of the first Christians. In other words, the New Testament is an account of the faith of the early Church. The stories and sayings of Jesus were collected and shared and heard by people who already had long experience of living the Christian faith together; perhaps a couple of generations.

In the earliest Christian writings, which pre-date the writing of the Gospels, you're just as likely to find instructions regarding church structure and the ordering of the liturgy, as anything else.

It's important because when we consider Matthew's community sitting down and hearing this Gospel in the 80s or 90s AD, they're not hearing Jesus' words about splitting families as a *warning* of terrible things to come; they're hearing them having already experienced that very thing.

Matthew's community still had close ties to the wider Jewish community around them. No doubt many new Christians had indeed experienced terrible strife with their closest family members, as they became followers of Jesus. And yet still the Church continued to grow, despite persecution, against all odds. What kept them going?

Given their Jewish inheritance, Matthew's listeners would probably have known that this passage about family strife is a quotation from the prophecy of Micah—and Micah gives us more context to these difficult words of Jesus today.

In chapter seven, Micah bewails the godlessness of the people. People lie in wait for each other; judges and officials take bribes; the powerful do what they like.

"Put no trust in a friend," Micah says, "have no confidence in a loved one... for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household."

"But," Micah goes on in the very next verse... "But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me."

Micah looked and waited for the salvation that would put right the injustices and divisions all around him, trusting that God would not forsake him.

And Matthew recorded these same words about division and strife, *confident that that trust had now been rewarded; confident in the knowledge that salvation from God had now come*, in the person of Jesus Christ.

There will always be cause for division—if it isn't faith, it'll be politics, or nationality, or race—and we humans will seemingly take any opportunity we can get to fall out with one another. Even *faith*—this precious and beautiful gift from God—will cause division in our sinful and fallen world.

Jesus is realistic about that. But he gives this warning about division *as the one in whom true unity is to be found*: as God the Son, who is in perfect union with the Father and the Spirit. And the one who has the power to bring together the torn and divided, and heal even the deepest wounds that separate us one from another.

There is no other who can bring us into this perfect unity that is the life of the Trinity.

It is a difficult call that the Lord makes on us; who expects us to put the kingdom ahead even of those who are closest to us. From the one who will judge whether we have truly carried our cross, or laid it down. But we are not left alone to do this.

The one who calls us knows and cares for us so deeply that he counts every hair on our heads; he is with us, through every trial. He sees and cares when even a sparrow falls to the ground; and he esteems us infinitely more highly than many sparrows.

And he became one of us, and experienced all the worst that this fallen and sinful world could do to him, so that he might make each one of us his children; brothers and sisters with each other, brought into the wonderful unity of God.

When Jesus took up his cross all the way to Gethsemane, in his death he brought to birth a new Christian family: he sees his mother and his beloved disciple standing there and says, "woman, here is your son." And in that moment, he invites all who follow him to join this divine family.

It is this invitation into this universal family that should give us hope, when we come up against our own divisions and difficulties, in families, in communities, in the world at large; hope that we are called into something *more*: and we are called by the only one who has the power to overcome those differences.

May we, like Micah, like Matthew and his community, and like countless others who have found their place in this family before us, put our hope in the Lord, and our trust in his power to save and transform. Amen.