

## Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, 2020

Matthew 10:24-39

'Whom to fear'

Pastor Fraser Pearce

This is how today's Gospel reading starts: **'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!'**

Jesus is speaking to his disciples, to the twelve apostles

As he is sending them out to proclaim the good news

That the kingdom of heaven has come near

As part of this sending he gives them teaching

To equip them for the task

Now today we're coming in halfway through his instruction

And we're picking up at the point where he is telling his disciples

*To expect opposition*

And to expect in the form of insult, and worse

He says to them: **If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!**

This word 'Beelzebul' comes up in Matthew's Gospel

In relation to Jesus casting out demons

The Pharisees say of Jesus, **'It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons, that this fellow casts out demons.'** *Matthew 12:24*

So to call someone Beelzebul is to say that they are evil, in its lowest form

Jesus is helping his disciples understand what will happen to them

As they proclaim the good news

If he, Jesus, has been called the ruler of demons

If has been called evil

Then his students, his apprentices, the members of his household

Should not be surprised to receive the same sort of treatment, or worse

It's from this point that Jesus goes on to give his disciples encouragement

And to open them to see the ministry they will do *from God's perspective*

Listen to what Jesus says: **'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.'**

This word 'fear' is going to be a big word in what follows

And we need to tune in to this, because fear is such a big force in life

Especially fear of what other people will think of us  
Or fear of what other people will say about us  
Or fear of what other people will do to us  
It seems to me that almost all of our behaviour as human beings  
Is shaped by this fear – even if we don't like to admit it to ourselves.  
It seems to me that Jesus, through his teaching  
Is getting us in touch with the reality of our fears  
To grow us in the life of faith  
Again, he says, '**So have no *fear* of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.**  
Do not fear those who say that you are evil, because the truth will come out  
Think of it this way: imagine you are in court facing a false charge  
And imagine there is someone giving false testimony against you  
That's a fearful thing  
But imagine your lawyer turns to you and says: don't worry  
We have video evidence of this guy talking with others  
About how he's going to take you down with lies  
This will be brought forward in the court: you will be vindicated  
On hearing this, our fears would dissipate  
We would welcome the coming judgement  
Now Jesus is assuring us that there will be a time of truth  
That human beings may cover up, *but that God will reveal all*  
Jesus assures us of this to free us from our fears  
And to give us confidence as we proclaim the Gospel

In fact, for disciples of Jesus, there is a call for transparency, and more  
This is what Jesus says, **What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.**  
Since everything will be brought into the light by God  
We do not need to hide anything  
We can hand on the whole of Jesus teaching, for all to hear  
In the church there is no secret teaching of Jesus  
That is handed on only to the initiates  
There is the good news for all nations  
Proclaimed from the housetops, even from the internet  
Anyone can tune in; anyone can hear. Nothing is hidden

Then Jesus returns to the reality of our fears. He says: **Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.**

The worse that human opponents can do is to kill the body

But God can destroy both body and soul in hell

Note again that Jesus is speaking to his dearly loved disciples here

He is speaking out of love, for our good

Fear is a reality, it is a part of human existence

And a spiritually wise and mature person

Will fear God rather than human beings

So when we face human opposition, even if it is only in our minds

As we anticipate what might happen when we confess that Jesus is Lord

We do well to remember that is God, rather than any human being

Who has true power over us, who can truly determine our destiny

Again, remember, Jesus is teaching this to his dearly loved disciples

He is speaking out of love

He does not want us to be trapped in fear, even of God

But to live in the freedom of love

That's why he goes on to say: **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.**

When we are consumed by fear about what other people

Will think about us, or say about us, or do to us

Then we do well to remember that it is God who has true power

We do well to fear God rather than any human being

But when we look away from human beings and up to God

Then our fears can melt away

God does not will to harm us

He cares even for the sparrows; he knows us better than we know ourselves

We are precious to him; you are precious to him

Look to God and know that you are loved

Jesus then gives us words that, as it happens

Are used at the beginning of our confirmation rite: **'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in**

**heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.**

At the heart of our relationship with God is our confession of Jesus  
Our willingness to be associated with him, even in the face of human opposition  
Our Lord assures us that as we acknowledge him before others  
He will acknowledge us before his Father, before our Father  
But he also warns us of the consequences of denying him before others:  
He will deny us before the Father in heaven  
Now if the gospel stopped here we could think to ourselves  
Well, there it is: I'll confess Christ before others  
And be acknowledged by him before the Father  
The path of salvation is straight and I'm on it

But it is not that straightforward  
We are, all of us, more fearful than we think  
We are made of flesh and blood, and we crave the approval of other people  
We naturally crave the approval of other people  
More than we want the approval of God  
The Gospel of Matthew makes this very clear

Listen to this from Matthew 26, from the night when Jesus was betrayed:  
***Peter said to him, 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.'* Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' Peter said to him, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.'** And so said all the disciples.

Peter and the disciples had heard Jesus' teaching  
In their own minds they were committed  
They would be with Jesus no matter what, they would not deny him  
But Jesus knows that we are made of flesh and blood  
And he knows what happens when we put our confidence in ourselves  
He knew what would happen with Peter  
This is what we read: ***Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.'* But he denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.' When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.'** Again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent

***betrays you.’ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know the man!’ At that moment the cock crowed.***

We are made of flesh and blood, we naturally give in to fear  
The cock would crow for us, too  
Then where is hope for us?

There is one human being who did not crave human approval above God’s  
That one human being is the man Jesus Christ  
The one who gave us life for us even while we were natural enemies of God  
Who died for us who naturally seek human approval rather than God’s  
Our way forward is not to have confidence in ourselves  
Weak as we are  
But to look to Christ, the one who made the good confession  
Even before Pontius Pilate

Dear Christian people, you have been baptised into Christ  
The confession that he made is yours  
And he has taken Peter’s denial, your denial on himself  
He gives you his Spirit to free you from fear  
And to open your mouth to confess him  
A confession that does not come from human strength or commitment  
But from God  
May God keep us in Christ Jesus and his love  
So that by his Spirit we confess Christ  
And look to God our Father, knowing that we are loved  
And that this love can flow through us  
Even to those who would oppose us  
May God grant this to us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.