

Like your Master

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[0 : 0 0] Let's share our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence.

! May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher,! and your great glory our supreme concern. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Do you remember the scene in The Wizard of Oz where Dorothy and the Scarecrow and the Tin Man are going through a dark and scary wood?

It's one of the ones where they're following the yellow brick road and they're wondering what they should expect to meet on the way as they go between these dark trees. And the Tin Man says that there are going to be lions and tigers and bears and they start repeating lions and tigers and bears.

Oh my! Well, I sort of wonder if in our reading today when Jesus was telling the disciples, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

[1 : 1 8] If the disciples started repeating wolves and serpents and doves, oh my! Oh my! Wolves and serpents and doves, oh my! If you ever get irritated by writers or preachers mixing their metaphors, then just consider this one from Jesus in which we are to see simultaneously sheep and serpents and doves.

Oh my! And he switches metaphors again at the end of today's reading when he talks about servants being like their master and disciples being like their teacher.

But despite this chopping and changing between different animal and human metaphors, the real overarching metaphor in this passage is Jesus himself.

He's the teacher that the disciples should strive to be like. He's the master that they should strive to be like. He is the one who is as wise as any serpent and yet also as innocent as any dove.

And like the tin man talking to Dorothy and the scarecrow about lions and tigers and bears, Jesus is telling the disciples what they can expect.

[2 : 3 9] But rather than telling them what to expect as they go along the yellow brick road, Jesus is telling them what to expect as they go out on mission. Jesus is telling his disciples to expect that their experience on mission will be like his experience on mission.

That they should expect to be treated as he was treated. The servant is not above the master, the disciple is not above the teacher. And like the disciples, Jesus is our master and our teacher.

So we should expect to be treated as he was treated. We should expect to be treated as Jesus was treated because we're participating in the same mission in the world.

And so we get the same reaction. Here in our passage today, Jesus describes that reaction as being persecution, as being handed over and hated.

Now elsewhere when Jesus talks about persecution and suffering, it's about his own passion, or about the mysterious cataclysm at the end of the age.

- [3 : 56] But here in Matthew 10, it's in the middle of teaching and instructions about mission. So Jesus is saying here that persecution and suffering are part and parcel of mission.
- Jesus is not saying that we should seek out suffering or persecution. It's not something we should provoke or aim for. They aren't a proof to show our commitment.
- Rather, persecution comes as one possible reaction that people have to mission. It's not a goal, but it is a response.
- That's what it means to be sheep among wolves, to be carrying the Christ light into a darkened world that does not understand it.
- Sometimes the world, the wolves, the darkness strikes back. Just as Jesus will be dragged before a governor and a king as a reaction to his mission, so the disciples will be dragged for governors and kings as a reaction to carrying on that same mission.
- [5 : 13] Now I would like to say that Jesus was speaking to the disciples in an especially violent and brutal time, under an especially violent and brutal empire, when the likelihood of being flogged or killed for one's faith was particularly high, and that the warning about persecution does not resonate today.
- But we're all too aware that Christians in China and Russia and elsewhere are unable to worship freely and attract the hostile attention of governors and kings.
- I would like to say that in a Western democratic society like ours, we have such firmly established freedoms that we do not need to fear persecution for doing the work of mission.
- But last week, the Bishop of Washington, D.C., Marion Budd, preached before the newly inaugurated president and urged him to have mercy to have mercy on those in America who are scared, to have mercy on frightened, lesbian, gay and trans teenagers, and to have mercy on immigrants anxious about being deported or separated from their families.
- And this plea for mercy has provoked a hostile reaction from many American politicians, including one congressman who even called for the bishop herself to be deported.
- [6 : 47] Beyond angry rhetoric, the new administration has empowered immigration enforcement to make raids on churches in pursuit of migrants. witnessing for governors and kings indeed.
- Carrying the Christ light provokes a reaction from a darkened world that does not understand it. But we can say for us here in Edinburgh, thankfully and blessedly, the threat of persecution seems very far distant.
- May we be grateful for it. But that doesn't mean that we don't face difficulties in mission. Persecution and hostility wasn't the only reaction that Jesus got on his mission.
- And it wasn't the only difficulty that he faced. Often when we think about mission, we want to think in terms of success. Whether we're thinking about inviting people to church or feeding people or caring for the environment, whatever form of mission we are being sent on, we focus on questions like how many people will come?
- How many meals can we make? How much can we reduce our carbon dioxide emissions? And if we don't hit our targets, if we fail, then we can think that we haven't been doing mission properly.
- [8 : 25] But Jesus is warning his followers that failures and disappointments are part and parcel of mission. In last week's reading, Jesus told his disciples that if a town did not welcome or listen to them, then they should just shake the dust from their feet and move on to the next one.
- In today's text, he says that when, and note he says when, not if, when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. The disciples should expect rejection.

And that's because the servants are not above their master. Jesus too was rejected in the towns that he worked in. In the next chapter of Matthew, chapter 11, he rebukes cities where he did deeds of power for not listening to his message.

Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. In Luke's gospel, in chapter 4, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Jesus is rejected in his hometown of Nazareth.

We should expect to be treated as Jesus was treated. And that means that we can authentically and sincerely and prayerfully carry out mission, being wise as serpents and innocent as doves, and still meet with rejection.

[9 : 52] Often when we think of mission, we can come up with long lists of how we could meet people's needs, how we can share the gospel with our neighbours. At the four congregations conversation last week, it was really inspiring and encouraging to hear the many different ways that the four churches undertake mission.

Here was how one congregation supported young people with a summer club. Here was how another did fundraising for a fresh start. My favourite, just because I'd never heard of anything like it, was learning that Paulworth Church have a canal boat that they use for various projects, motoring up and down the canal.

And when we think of mission, we can think of wanting to tick all the possible boxes, spreading the gospel and youth ministry and going into care homes and caring for the homeless and planting trees and, and, and.

Jesus tells his disciples that they will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. They can't go to everywhere that they are sent to.

They can't do everything. And that's because the servants are not above the Master. Jesus notes in Luke 4 when he is being rejected at Nazareth that many were hungry in the prophet Elijah's day but that Elijah was only sent to one widow at Zarephath.

[11 : 32] And that there were many lepers in Israel in prophet Elisha's day but Elisha only cleansed Naaman the Syrian. Surely, however much we read of Jesus feeding the 4,000 and the 5,000, there were still people who were hungry in Israel in Jesus' day.

However much we read of Jesus healing the blind and the lame there were still people who were sick in his day. When Jesus eats with the poor people complain about him eating with sinners and tax collectors.

When Jesus eats with the rich his disciples complain about him being anointed with expensive perfume when the money could have gone to the poor. Wherever he goes someone seems to think that he should be going somewhere else.

As he tells his disciples when they question his inefficient use of scarce missional resources the poor are always with us. We should expect to be treated as Jesus was treated.

The mission task is never ending and we cannot be present for everyone at once. We will ask ourselves why didn't we do this?

[12 : 55] Why couldn't we do that? But that doesn't mean that we aren't doing mission faithfully. It only means that we are not greater than our master.

The message that Jesus is giving his disciples here is not a comfortable one. Remember he's giving these warnings as part of their instructions on mission as part of what they should expect.

The message here in this part of the gospel is not the comforting one that Jesus will be with them when they suffer and have difficulties. True though that is.

Here the message is that they will suffer and have difficulties because Jesus is with them. Because the disciples are carrying out the same mission as Jesus.

Because they are inspired by the same spirit. because they are serving the same loving father. They will meet with the same response. Rejection.

[14 : 03] Indifference. Limitations. Disappointment. This is what Jesus tells us to expect.

We should expect to be treated as Jesus was treated because that is part of entering into life in Christ. It is by trying to do as Jesus did that we become more fully members of his body.

It is by trying to move in the world as Jesus did that we learn how to love God and learn more about how we are held in God's love.

Jesus tells his disciples that when they witness to him, it is not you who speak but the spirit of your father speaking through you. When the disciples are carrying out mission and when they face difficulties because of that mission, it is the Holy Spirit moving through them.

When we carry out mission and whether we see it as success or a failure, whether we rejoice or whether we are frustrated, we are being moved by the same spirit, the same Holy Spirit that forms us in the likeness of Christ, the same Holy Spirit who speaks through us in our prayers and our praises to God the Father, the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.

[15 : 39] We should expect to be treated as Jesus was treated because that is part of how God draws us into the life of the Trinity, of how God shares God's self with us, by being sent on mission as Jesus was sent by God the Father, by allowing the Spirit to speak through us and then by enduring rejection and disappointment as Jesus did, like our Master did, like our Teacher did.

we come closer to God. We come closer to God whenever we strive to be like our Teacher and like our Master.

And sometimes that can be in moments of great joy and celebration, meals with friends, wine at weddings. It can be in the hard but rewarding work of helping those in need.

It can be in moments of prayer and contemplation, and in studying and sharing the Gospel together, but it is also in times of difficulty and of distress.

In all of these, God the Spirit shapes us into the image of God the Son, in praise and service of, and to the great joy of God the Father, in the pouring out of God's unending love.

[17 : 06] life. It is true whenever we follow after Jesus. It is true when we share bread and wine together. It is the Spirit that gathers us together as the body of Christ, as we offer praise and thanks to God the Father for sending God's Son.

And it is true when we find following Jesus frustrating and difficult. So when we try to follow Jesus on mission, and when, and I say when, not if, something that we do doesn't work out as we hope or expect, we mustn't think that what we've done is somehow a wasted effort, that we haven't been doing what God has sent us out to do.

God uses even our failures, or what we think of in our human terms, as our failures, to draw us close, especially our failures, perhaps.

And it is knowing that, it is having total confidence that the Lord of the harvest will care for the workers in the fields, whatever yield they bring in.

It is that that enables us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. We can bring all our wisdom, all our skills, all our capabilities into service, but we can also bring all our gentleness, all our innocence, and all our love, because we do not need to fear disappointment or rejection.

[18 : 59] We must and we can give all of ourselves, because our whole selves are embraced by God and sent out by God. It is in the sending out and in our going that God embraces us, not at our destination, whether or not we even get there.

we must give our all, whether we meet with triumph or disaster, we must treat those two imposters just the same, as Kipling has it.

Jesus is telling his disciples, can't read my own writing here. Jesus is telling his disciples what to anticipate, but he does not want them to be afraid.

He tells them, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.

Do not be anxious. The shepherd is not abandoning his sheep to the wolves. We can expect to be treated as Jesus was treated, not just by the world, but by God.

[20 : 25] The same spirit is our comforter. The same loving creator watches over us and delights in us. The same God, three in one, draws us close and shares God's God's own life, God's own loving self with us, both in our joys and in our troubles.

Let's pray together. Lord, we ask that by your power we would be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, that we would endure in whatever mission you send us on, whether we meet with success and welcome or rejection and disappointment.

we ask that the spirit of our loving father would speak through us, would give us endurance and patience and love.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.