21st June 2020

Matthew 10.24-39

Its Father’s Day today!

There was a joke going round which stated ‘evidence’ suggesting Covid-19 was created by women. The post read: ‘I’ve worked out the Corona Virus!! IT’S BEEN CREATED BY WOMEN!! Think about it lads……

‘1 – No Football

‘2 – All pubs are shut

‘3 – Three months of Quarantine (so you can finally get those odd jobs done)

‘4 – Symptoms of Corona are flu like… THEY KNOW THATS OUR KRYPTONITE

‘5 – They even had the audacity to name it after a beer!

Men, as we know like to be able to laugh. For some this pandemic has been no laughing matter.

Steve Legg a British entertainer writes in Sorted Magazine, (May June 2020) a men’s Magazine voted the world’s most wholesome men’s magazine:

*’ I read in the news the other day that some people have been up in the loft, digging out the fairy lights and putting them up the decorations to bring a bit of joy into these strange and uncertain times.*

*In a weird way it does feel like Christmas. With the kids at home from school, no church on Sunday and none of the normal work. I’ve already lost track of what day it is. The only thing missing is the relatives and my job. But we’re zooming in from time to time.*

*It’s easy to feel overwhelmed as we lose our income, have exams cancelled and ear frightening news of what this disease looks like. Twinkly lights perhaps don’t feel like much comfort when we don’t know how we’ll pay the electricity needed to light them. But, if our minds are to survive the next few months, it matters that we find joy in the small things: the twinkly lights , the onset of summer, the kindness of strangers, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer.’*

He talks about how his daughter is coeliac – the disease meaning she must eat a gluten free diet. With short supplies at the supermarket they ran short of food for her but friends and neighbours and strangers on Facebook offered some from their stash.

Steve Legg continues:

*I love what the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sundak said, ‘Now, more than at any time in our history, we will be judged by our capacity for compassion. When this is over, and it will be over, we want to look back on this moment and remember the many small acts of kindness, done by us and to us’.*

*Sometimes we find the joy by being the joy. Checking in on our neighbours, buying them some milk. Putting out the bins for people in your street, walking their dog for them – staying socially but not emotionally distant. Calling that relative who you know is isolated, even though you’ve never been terribly close to them.*

*I think the world is going to look different by the time this is over, in more ways than we are able to understand at the moment, but my hope , in fact my prayer, is that it’s a kinder, more connected world that has learned to find joy in the small things. Now that’s something worth spreading’*

Miles Protter a mentor, in the same magazine talks about resilience.

He writes:

***A good definition of resilience is ‘the capacity to adapt to adversity by bending not breaking, like bamboo.’*** *My mentor said resilience in these times is not about control, competence or what I know. Rather its an inner journey into my vulnerability and fear of loss which are past focused. I must learn to live in the now. It’s about who I’m being, more than what I do.*

He has an Italian brother in Law called Lorenzo who was locked down in Rome and who saw his confinement as an opportunity to reflect. Similarly, Protter writes:

*‘Mandela, Gandhi and Martin Luther king endured prison. They suffered but emerged as great leaders. so, I’m listening to my brother in law. Confinement is our new reality but offers the same opportunity as it did to Mandela.*

*We will all face hardships – financial stress, loneliness, caring for kids, feeling trapped or bored – but we’ll also have the opportunity to connect to loved ones, develop patience and grace, read, relax, watch films, meditate, write, paint, make music, garden, play, sort through old photos or start a new project. Maybe reinvent our lives.’*

Confinement also brings hope. His brother in laws’ 88-year old mother has used her time indoors to prepare and freeze a feast for the inevitable day of celebration when the ordeal is over, and the family can be together again.

In our gospel reading this week Jesus has some challenging things to say about resilience, about coping with adversity, about family and finding true contentment and connection. His use of words is dangerous and even offensive. JK Rowling would be startled!

Perhaps, in the light of recent conflicts, we will recoil most when Jesus starts off by comparing the life of discipleship to being a slave.[[1]](#endnote-1)

***4****“The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant (slave) above his master.****25****It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! (Matthew 10.24-25)*

This reading continues Jesus’ teaching to the disciples about mission that we started last week. The first section focuses on the identification of the disciples with their teacher – if he has been persecuted and maligned, then they must expect the same, especially to the degree that they emulate him. Beelzebul (Lord of the House) is derived from the Philistine Baal, and by Jesus’ time had come to be used to refer to a demonic force hostile to God. So, the slander is effectively saying that Jesus was in league with God’s enemies.

This is one of the most scorching sermons from Jesus, as he seems to say how impossibly dangerous the role of telling the Good News is and standing up for the gospel values.

***26****“So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.****27****What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.*

Jesus is talking about the call to speak up for the gospel – to speak out and not be afraid.

Marcus Rashford’s interview on Breakfast TV about his experience of hardship and the need for food provision when school meals are not available during the holidays was very moving. He is rightly lauded. He spoke out asking that the free school meals vouchers continue into the summer. Any MPs and charities who have raised this again and again, and even last week, do have the right to feel angry, though, that their questions had been batted aside. It took a bit of celebrity stardust to bring the u turn from the government.

It also came in a week when controversially the UK Government's decided to merge the Department for International Development (DFID) with the UK Foreign Office.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Announcing the change, Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisted that this was a "long overdue reform" and would "unite our aid with our diplomacy."

Three former Prime ministers criticized the move. Christian Aid went as far as to call the move an "act of political vandalism."

World Vision UK, said:

“By giving the Foreign Secretary oversight of aid, we will lose transparency, effectiveness and accountability, and risk money being diverted to address UK foreign policy interests rather than alleviating poverty. “The coronavirus pandemic has taught us that global solidarity is more important than ever, and that only by working together can we create a safer and more prosperous world for everyone.’

Earlier in the week the Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick[[3]](#endnote-3) backed Richard Desmond's scheme for 1,500 homes in east London. The application, previously rejected by Tower Hamlets Council, was approved the day before the introduction of a new council community levy which would have meant the company paying an additional £40m. Mr Desmond two weeks after planning permission was granted, donated £12,000 to the Conservative Party. £40 million in taxes would have helped no end a struggling local council.

In Palestine, the Israeli government is planning to do a land grab in the West Bank and further annex more land illegally and against international opposition and laws.

I could go on – but there is always plenty hidden in the news and under the cover of coronavirus and other distractions like the football being back – for us to speak out on and call for justice, at risk of being got at – as Jesus warns in this passage. Of being slandered or denounced.

Then to further up the ante, Jesus seems to demolish the relationships that might support us and constitute the fabric of society namely our families:

***34****“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.****35****For I have come to turn*

*“‘a man against his father,
    a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—****36****a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.*

The mother - daughter relationship is one of the most crucial, transmitting the life sustaining wisdom of one generation on to the next through the young woman, joining the household soon, no doubt, to bear children. Brothers will fight (there are plenty of sibling rivalries in Scripture), but we are heartbroken to think of faith being the cause. Elsewhere in scripture partners, especially wives, are encouraged not to make their faith divisive to their partner but to love them through their deeds and character (e.g. 1 Peter 3, 1 Cor 7.12-20).

But we must hear the heartbreak in Jesus’ voice, coming out as angry irony. He knows people will bear the cost of following him, sharing in the rejection he will soon go through. He encourages his disciples not to fear ‘them’, meaning the ‘wolves’ among whom he candidly sends them (10.16). These may include the authorities, but also those who drag people before the authorities, wanting them to get into trouble (10.17). With rhetorical force he tries to break the power of the culture over people’s lives. We can read it like this: ‘Don’t fear those who *say* you should be cast on the rubbish heap for all eternity. Fear the one who could and *doesn’t*. HA! What’s Rome, what’s the dominant culture got over you now?’

Loyalty to Jesus is more important than the culturally important claims of blood relatives. Following Jesus is the primary call in life; whoever is not prepared to set aside anything else in life that interrupts the claim of Christ will not be worthy of the kingdom. Loving God comes first – God then sends you back to love neighbour (including family). But put first things first.

*David Warbrick is Vicar of*[*All Saints Kings Heath in the Anglican Diocese of Birmingham*](http://www.allsaintskingsheath.org.uk/). He writes a word about Jesus’ daring language:

Disciple is dignified. Slave is not. Why does he use both images? Families are good, aren’t they? Why does he hammer them? Worse, why does he actively say we are unworthy if we love them (that is families) more than him? He knows it is not his followers’ fault they will be persecuted for speaking of grace. It is the world’s fault, so it is deeply ironic that he pretends it’s his fault (‘I have not come to bring peace on earth…’ 10.34). It is unquestionably Rome’s sword that is to blame. Rome enslaves.

By shockingly comparing his followers to slaves, he includes disciples who really are slaves and, in that sense, frees them from those who claim to own them. He stoops rhetorically low to raise them up.

As for not being ‘worthy,’

*“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*

 It’s a shock to hear, until we remember we aren’t called to be worthy. Jesus provides the worthiness.

No, that twist is there to shine a light on the church as a new place for anchorage if your family is tragically broken. He is predicting the suffering of the church and offering hope. By the time Matthew records this, he is describing what the Church has indeed experienced, so if anyone is at worship hearing his Gospel, having lost their family because of their commitment to Christ, it is indeed an encouragement, not a criticism. And for those whose family is factitious or even abusive – church can be a new family – and a place of healing. But even that is not guaranteed – because churches are still made up of sinners – flawed human beings.

Many images from the last fortnight strike deep fear: fires, angry crowds, hatred spat across police lines. One image stands out, though, glowing with most unexpected hope. Praying on Father’s Day the hope is multiplied as [Patrick Hutchinson’s daughters jump for joy](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/patrick-hutchinsonblack-lives-matter-hero-daughters-speak-bbc-breakfast-a4470116.html) seeing their father’s gracious strength, carrying an injured white far-right protester away to safety.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Mr. Hutchinson, a personal trainer, formed a group with four of his friends, who are part of London-based close protection group Ark Security, to protect young BLM protesters from getting caught up in violence at the protests.

They took it upon themselves to be the “overseers” during the demonstrations, to make sure those who needed help were taken safely to emergency service workers.

The group spotted a lone white man being dragged by activists through a crowd and thrown on the steps near the Royal Festival Hall. "It wasn’t a good place for him to be," he said. "He was on his own and it was not a pretty scene."

Mr. Hutchinson said he rushed in, put the man on his shoulder and moved him out.

Kendal, eight, and Sidéna, 10, appeared alongside their father on [BBC Breakfast](https://www.standard.co.uk/topic/bbc-breakfast), days after he [rescued an injured white man during clashes](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/photo-black-lives-matter-supporter-carries-farright-protester-a4468581.html) between far-right activists and anti-racism protesters.

Gazing proudly up at her dad, whose brave actions have been celebrated across the world, Kendal said: “I’m just happy that daddy went and saved the man because he could have died."

[](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/black-man-rescues-white-man-london-protests-patrick-hutchinson-a4468876.html)

Her elder sister then described how “good” it felt to hear her dad described as a “superhero” at school.

“He’s always been helping people like that so for people to see that as well… It felt really good,” Sidéna said.

Quizzed by host [Naga Munchetty](https://www.standard.co.uk/topic/naga-munchetty) on the positive example he had set, Mr Hutchinson said: "You have to hope that things will be better and be positive, otherwise what is the point?"

"I have to raise my daughters to believe that one day they will have an equal opportunity just as any other child out there in the world in whatever they endeavour to do in their futures."

It was an inspiring example of being a Father, of being prepared to lose your life for the values of the kingdom of God rather than tribal or family loyalties. It was an act of grace – let’s hope we can expose ourselves to that kind of virus – the virus of grace where all are cherished and loved.

Jesus says in this passage:

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+10&version=NIV#fen-NIV-23447b)*]****30****And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.****31****So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

 Aidan Barrett's words were inspiring in the short testimony we saw earlier:  'My faith helps me because it makes me feel that I'm not alone.  I'm safe because God is all around us and He's always looking after us'.   What a brilliant way to put it!  From a 10-year-old.  The living God, so near, so apparent.

On this Father’s Day let’s just pray these scriptures:

God, we feel the sadness of Jesus’ description of family breakdown as we hold before you the members of our family we miss: parents, children, in-laws, siblings. We pray for joyful meetings as restrictions gradually ease. We pray especially for those households where someone has died and they have not been able to say a proper goodbye.

Hearing the searing irony of Jesus, we ask you to open our eyes to our wilful familial divisions, as if there isn’t enough conflict out there already. Put our pettiness in perspective and reveal to us the gifts in each other that we risk taking for granted or under-valuing.

We let Jesus shine his loving light to reveal the fault lines in our families and wider relationships, asking for your healing. We pray for families where lockdown has revealed fractures not acknowledged before. Where separation is becoming the only option, we pray for it to be as kind as possible.

Reveal the fault lines in society of prejudice, injustice, poverty and privilege. Give us courage and patience to attend to them, imagining what Jesus would have to say. Amid the conflict we look for acts of grace and expose ourselves to their good contagion.

May we carry our cross and be faithful to you O lord.

Amen.

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/107-may-june-2020-a/proper-7/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/an-act-of-political-vandalism-christian-charities-respond-to-government-merging-international-development-with-foreign-office?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11614259_daily%20news%2017%20June&dm_i=16DQ,6WXMB,KCOFX7,RSFNA,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53056102> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/patrick-hutchinson-black-lives-matter-hero-daughters-speak-bbc-breakfast-a4470116.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)