

Bishop's reflection – 13th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel begins with the call of the twelve Apostles and Jesus' instructions to them. He begins by telling them to travel lightly and to live simply, to depend on the grace of God and the hospitality of others and to proclaim the Gospel by healing, teaching and casting out demons. The second part of this chapter is more ominous, warning them of the opposition and persecution they will face, the trials they will endure and the potential for suffering and death. In last week's Gospel, Jesus addressed the fear that might lead his Apostles to renounce their faith. He also reminded them of God's faithfulness, who stands by those who stand with him. Jesus' instructions to his Apostles concludes with Jesus' exhortation in today's Gospel passage, that our bond to God and to the message we are called to profess is more sacred than the bond we have with our own family members and more important than what people may think of us, even if it brings us to the point of suffering, like a notorious criminal, on a cross.

The passage concludes with further assurances and promises, that, in their mission, the Apostles will be one in status and prominence with Christ, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Just as Jesus is the physical manifestation (the Epiphany) of the Father, so too the "one who is sent out" will be physical manifestations of Christ in his/her mission to the world.

I deliberately add the feminine pronoun to indicate that the whole Church is Apostolic, that each one of us is included in Jesus' mission to go out to the whole world. Though the Apostles/Bishops may have a particular emissary role as Vicars of Christ, Jesus' instructions are addressed to us all, so that all Christians may know their true call in the midst of the world.

Loving anything or anyone more than Christ becomes an impediment to our true call, to bring our love for Christ and his message of reconciliation, healing, forgiveness, generosity and service to all those we meet. Resistance and opposition from loved ones, or from strangers, are always possible. Staying true to our mission, and to Christ, in our willingness to accept the trials that may come, even to the point of ridicule/suffering/humiliation (the cross), will be our strength.

Jesus assures us that we will not be alone. There will be those who welcome us, welcome the message and welcome him. And just as by welcoming him we welcome the Father, those who welcome us welcome the one who sent us and will be blessed by him -- "Truly I tell you -- that person will not lose their reward".

In the words leading up to today's Gospel Jesus is adamant, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against a mother..." He speaks about division in one's own family. These are difficult words indeed, but reflective of our loyalties and the conflict that we experience within. Would it not be easier if we could get away with endless compromises, more peaceful if we go along with the rest? We may not be living in a time of outward persecution, but the decisions are no less difficult. How do I remain true to my faith as a Christian when confronted by someone whose favour I treasure?

Jesus tells us, "our response in the midst of struggle, matters". That the struggle is real, possessing both an internal and an external component. The struggle within is with ourselves and the many relationships and things that we value. The external struggle is in relationship to the world and to others, the tensions and the conflict that are created. For those who avoid conflict at all cost, who

solely want to be at peace, this will be difficult and may lead to moments of compromise. For those who hearken to God's Word today, they will find both strength and guidance in its power.