

Matthew 10: 34 - 42

One of the things which has rather surprised the people who study church growth is that many of the churches which are really booming are the ones which ask the most of their members. While we hear a lot about making the church accessible and making worship a low threshold experience, what we are seeing is that some people are catching on to the fact that symbolic religion is about as nutritious as a caffeine free diet soft drink.... it's cold, it's carbonated and it is sweet.. But there is nothing there, on a steady diet of it you will die of starvation.

In Matthew's gospel chapter 10 it speaks of Jesus charge to His disciples for their present and future ministry, commissioning them for the preaching of the gospel of God's kingdom until the return of Christ.

The entering of the kingdom requires - (like) the unquestioning obedience of a child. It marks absolute loyalty and devotion from His disciples. If we look back to the first century, fifty years after Jesus' death. Before the last of Jesus' disciples died they had brought many thousands of men, women and children into the church. They had to give a lot and to suffer in order to accomplish this task.

1. John died of old age exiled on Patmos Island.
2. Judas after betraying Jesus hanged himself.
3. Peter was crucified, during the persecution of Nero.
4. Andrew died on a cross at Patrae.
5. James was thrown from a pinnacle of the Temple and beaten to death.
6. Bartholomew was flayed alive.
7. James the elder son of Zebedee was beheaded.
8. Thomas was run through the body with a lance.
9. Phillip was hanged.
10. Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows.
11. Simon died on a cross in Persia.
12. Matthew was stoned then beheaded.

What sacrifices! Why? In the words of the Apostle Paul they were held captive by the words and teaching of Jesus Christ. Paul's way of saying they were slaves to Christ.

It is quite likely we will never be tested to the same extent these first disciples were.

But our submission to God's rule is in our interest, because His kingdom is like hidden treasure, or a pearl of great price... And supreme value to our life for which sacrifice is worthwhile.

Jesus says to His disciples in the passage we have heard today "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth, I have not to bring peace but a sword". In this particular New Testament passage I do not believe Jesus was talking about a sword that could be raised up in arms against another in times of men's wars. But the sword is the Word of God. In Hebrews ch. 4 vs. 12: it reads .. Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The word of God penetrates and judges.. In 1st Peter vs.23 it reads; "You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God." A seed is very powerful having the principle of life and growth within it, and so can the word of God if we let it, it can penetrate our lives like a sword, helping us to live as Christ's disciples.

God's word is seen in the bible as something living and active. In Hebrews ch. 55: For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the in the thing for which I sent it. And in John's gospel chapter verse 1: it say's "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God".

What is the Word of God ? 'Anything by which God communicates himself to man'. Supremely Christ Himself is the Word of God. Anyone who has seen Jesus has seen the Father. And in every generation, and every part of the world, the word has to become flesh before people can see the truth and reality of God. In this age it is not enough to throw biblical statements to the outsider. For most God's words are empty words. But when the word is demonstrated in our lives, relationships, lifestyles and love, then the presence of the living Christ is clearly manifested. God is our strength, author of all our past and our future victories, by whose assistance we can excel and gloriously conquer and triumph over our enemies, if we let His word penetrate our minds, hearts and lives.

Jesus goes on to say to His disciples “ I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of ones own household”. In Jesus’ time, the Jews had a striking way of expressing the love they felt for different people, “Instead of saying - “I love you more than I love him”, they would say - “I love you and hate him”. This was a Jewish way of expressing preference in relationships and did not mean the second person was hated. So when Jesus said these words it was not meant that we should hate our families but, that our love for Him should come as a priority.

In my own life as many of you know in a family where my mother belonged to the Spiritualist church, not only my mother but many generations before her. My beliefs in Jesus Christ and knowing Him as my Lord and Saviour and following Him have always been my priority . I still love my mother and would do anything to help her, but I cannot and will not follow her beliefs.

Jesus does not mean me to hate my mother for her different beliefs, but my commitment to Jesus must be a priority in my life.

Then Jesus goes on to say to His disciples, “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me”. The cross Jesus speaks of, an instrument of death, a willingness to suffer. Martin Luther once said “You must start with the wounds of Christ, His death is central to our message.” And Paul also boasted of the cross. The cross is the place where we can find peace of mind, healing of relationships, and the strength to forgive others. It is God’s power over the forces of evil. Since the cross is at the heart of fellowship it is only by taking up the cross that fellowship is deepened and matured. But this will involve frequent and painful crucifixion of all forms of self, self seeking, self centeredness and self righteousness. And a willingness to remain weak and vulnerable in open fellowship with other Christians.

Jesus goes on to say “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”.

“No Higher Duty”

Henri Nouwen, a great spiritual writer was going to a monastery for a retreat. The monks observed vows of silence and the retreat was to be meditative and prayerful. Nouwen was delayed and late getting to the monastery on that miserable, rainy night. He rang the bell, well after bedtime, and was met at the door by one of the brothers. The brother warmly greeted him, took his wet coat, brought him to the kitchen and

made him a cup of tea. They chatted in the late hours and Nouwen began to relax and feel ready for the retreat. But he knew this monk was supposed to observe silence, so he finally asked him, "Why are you willing to sit and talk with me?" The monk replied, "Of all the duties of the Christian faith and the rules of my order, none is higher than love".

Jesus says "and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones-in the name of a disciple, truly I tell you none of these will loose their reward." We are called as Jesus' disciples to live as He did, we are to give up a way of life that solely concentrates on our own needs, and as Jesus did put others needs ahead of our own. These demands on disciples then and now can seem overwhelming. But we always need to keep in mind that we will never be perfect disciples. The word disciple means - one who learns - and learning is a steady process rather than a work of the moment.

Jesus reassures His disciples that He will reward those who receive them - thereby by revealing a part of the plan for provisioning ministry. He says "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Thus establishing a four-way partnership between God, Jesus, disciple and host. God initiated the partnership by sending Jesus. Jesus then sends His disciples. The disciples take the third step by going. And those who welcome the disciples take the final step by providing support. Jesus says welcoming the Son is the equivalent of welcoming the Father and welcoming the prophet host earns the host a prophets reward. This is the Jewish concept of shaliah, which regards the Kings emissary as if he were the King. The principle is still practiced . Governments consider an affront to an Ambassador as an affront to the nation.

We cannot even begin to imagine how it might change our lives if we begin to do what Christ wants us to do - if we begin to harvest the blessings that He has waiting for us. But I would like to suggest that, this week, we keep our eyes open for opportunities to say a kind word - or to make a friendly phone call - or to help someone with their work - or to offer that cup of water in Jesus' name. Let us give away as many blessings as we can. If we give our blessings to our Christian brothers and sisters, Jesus promises that God will give God's blessings to us.