

# CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	21 June 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Third Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

When I was in my early twenties I was given some good advice by an older Christian – ‘Keep on reading Christian biographies – they will teach and encourage you’. It was wise counsel. Decent biographies do not gloss over the difficult times and lay bare the way in which people wrestle with the demands of the Gospel on their lives. So I particularly admired the tenacity of Wilberforce in his long Parliamentary campaign for the abolition of slavery; I remain amazed by the compassion of Lord Shaftesbury that prompted his fight to limit the hours children worked in the factories; to abolish the practice of sending children up chimneys or down mines. A compassion that arose, not only from his Christian faith, but in no small part, from his own miserable childhood.

Inevitably, biographies tend to be about people who have done something remarkable, but I also stumbled upon a collection of sayings (in effect a biography) of a 17C French, lay Carmelite, Brother Lawrence, ‘The Practice of the Presence of God’. Brother Lawrence did not lead his life in public view; he washed dishes in a monastery, but he endeavoured to maintain a constant, devotional “conversation” with God, expressing his need and love for God in the midst of the day’s very ordinary activities. I was interested to learn recently that it was one of the books that influenced Pope Leo as a young man.

Books like this help us reflect what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, as we seek to follow Christ in our own time and in our own

particular set of circumstances. And that is exactly what today's Gospel passage is about. At first glance Matthew 10 can seem to be a rather haphazard collection of sayings of Jesus, some of them are unique to Matthew but others can be found in Luke's Gospel. Also, there are connecting links between the paragraphs that do not come out in an English translation.

Being a Christian is not always easy – Jesus' teachings challenge our attitudes; they demand we change our priorities, the way we use our time; they demand repentance, the renewal of our minds and lives to bring them in line with what God wants - the old battle against sin, the world and the devil remains real if we are to take our faith seriously.

And this is what our Gospel passage is about – being faithful to Jesus Christ under pressure. I want to pick out three key ideas from it.

First, that Jesus' disciples are called to share in Jesus' sufferings I admit this is not great marketing if we are trying to make the Christian faith attractive to people and it has to go hand in hand with other teachings of Jesus such as 'I am come that they may have life and have it in all its fullness'. But V 25, people thought Jesus was mad or possessed by Beelzebul/ prince of the demons – and there will be times when other people will think us odd or worse because of our faith. I recall reading the scorn with which the Bloomsbury set greeted TS Elliot's conversion to Christianity, so that Virginia Woolfe wrote, 'He is lost to us now'. Matthew pictures Jesus as the master of the household and his disciples like slaves - so, if the master of the house is maligned, how much more 'will they malign those of his household'.

For many Christians throughout the world, to be a follower of Jesus Christ may well entail real persecution. In England, it's much more likely to be disdain and people thinking that we're wasting our time – why bother? At times though we will need to stand up for what we believe is right –which takes courage.

Second, we have a God who cares and notices. We naturally fear people who can make our lives difficult. V 26 Jesus urges us not to fear human hostility; not to fear those who have power in this world when ultimate authority belongs to God. Instead, Jesus calls us to have a proper fear of God, but this goes hand in hand with trust in God who is our Heavenly Father; the God who cares for the smallest, most insignificant, almost worthless birds and takes note of us.

I suspect that many of us here feel that we are not very important – no biographies will ever be written about us. Some of us may also feel that our best years are behind us, that there is little we can do now because we are old, frail and increasingly powerless. It is easy to feel overlooked and worthless. If you are tempted to think like that it is to you to whom Jesus says, 'Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.' We have a God who cares and notices.

Third, being a disciple of Jesus Christ brings new loyalties. At first glance v 34-39 seem very odd. What does Jesus mean by saying that 'he has not come to bring peace on earth'? when his very title is Prince of Peace. It seems contradictory. We need to be careful – there are some well-honed principles for how to interpret individual verses in Scripture – the first being put it in context – see it within the theme of the whole passage and the theme of this chapter is being disciples when under pressure. The second is that individual passages are also governed by the whole of Scripture – and the very nature of God is that he loves peace and condemns violence. But Jesus used various rhetorical devices to make his message more effective and one that was commonly used by the rabbis was rabbinic hyperbole – in other words, the rabbis would exaggerate to make a point.

Jesus' teachings cause division – think about the Christian teaching that each and every person is made in the image of God and worthy of respect and being treated with dignity and think about how that

applies to some of the current debates around asylum seekers. In this passage Jesus is telling his followers that they will have new priorities that, at times, will trump some traditional loyalties. Being a baptised member of the Church brings new family loyalties to other Christians.

To conclude – in the words of St Richard, we are called to know, love and follow Jesus – it is not always easy but ‘do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows’. Amen.