

Impact of Jesus' mission (Matt 10:34-42)

1. Introduction

Last time on our journey through the teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel we were looking at some of what we should expect if we are prepared to go where Jesus sends, to do what he commands us to do. And we recognised that it could involve suffering, persecution, betrayal and even death - and we were challenged as to whether we are prepared to live in this way and to "acknowledge Jesus" to others in what we say and by what we do.

And if that isn't enough Jesus continues with some words that are both shocking and unexpected - "don't think for a moment that I came to earth to bring peace" (Matt 10:34).

Those of us who use social media will sometimes see posts made under someone's account that were clearly made by someone else, someone who had got hold of their phone for example. And we recognise that because the post outlines ideas, expresses emotions, uses words that we know just wouldn't have been used by the person in question based on what we know of that person.

And I think that for many of us - who have some level of understanding of who Jesus is - these words shock us and make us question what is going on in a similar way.

Surely Jesus was about peace.

When he was born the angels proclaimed peace:

Luke 2:14 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

He is even described as "our peace"

Ephesians 2:14 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,
and most of the 20 times he speaks about peace in the Gospels he does so in positive terms, encouraging us to experience it, and making it clear that this is something he provides to those who have chosen to follow him

John 14:27 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

There are only two occasions in the Gospels where Jesus speaks about not coming to bring peace - the passage we read earlier and a parallel passage in Luke 12:49-53 where he speaks about bringing fire on the earth (Lk 12:49)

And if that isn't enough Jesus goes on to say that he came to turn family members against each other - whereas the importance of family is something that is stressed throughout the Bible and, indeed, Jesus speaks out against those who are neglecting their parents so that they can offer sacrifices to God (Matt 15:3-6)

So what is going on here - are those first followers of Jesus suddenly finding out that he is against peace and against family? Something that would have gone so much against their understanding of who he was, what he stood for and what he came to do.

A bit like Conservative voters finding Teresa May rejecting the value of free markets or Jeremy Corbyn enthusiastically campaigning for a grammar school in every town.

Or do we need to look a little more deeply into what Jesus is saying? A Jesus who I believe is still fully committed to peace and still fully committed to family - but a Jesus who is still able to say with total consistency what he is saying.

Because behind what Jesus is saying is the reality that "People are naturally opposed to the will of God but it is only when we come under His authority that we experience real life"

We, as people are not neutral in terms of our relationship with God. We are either on his side or against him - we can't sit on the fence.

And so people oppose us when we speak about the message of Jesus; people oppose us when we try and live for Jesus.

And the key to understanding what Jesus is saying is when he speaks about being “worthy of him”.

2. **Being worthy of Jesus**

What does it mean to be “worthy of Jesus”? It’s probably something along the lines of “having what it takes to follow him”.

When someone is applying for a job and appears before an interview panel they are being assessed for whether they have what it takes to do the job - that could be in terms of skills, experience, type of character and so on. And the interview panel have to decide based on what they see and what they hear.

And here Jesus is laying out something of “what it takes” to really be his follower, to be the sort of person that he can send out into the world, to be the sort of person he can look at and say “yes, this person is prepared to follow me whatever it costs”.

And it is all too easy to get this the wrong way round - and we try and “test God” to see if he does the things we want and, if so, we will consent to following him. And we wouldn’t be the first to think this way - it has been going on for an awfully long time:

Genesis 28:20–22 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.’

But Jesus is calling for something different, something much more challenging, and it is as we understand the three things he calls for here that we start to grasp why he talks about not bringing peace and turning family members against each other.

2.1 Whom do we love most?

The first challenge of Jesus is about our “first love”, who has the first claim on our lives, our emotions, our hearts?

He isn’t saying for a moment that we shouldn’t love our parents or children - but he is calling on us to love him more.

Although the account in Luke goes even further:

Luke 14:26 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.

But even there - and where the same idea is used elsewhere in the Bible - Jesus isn’t actually calling on us to hate our families but he is demanding that our first loyalty is to him.

And as we do so this can lead to division and disagreement within our families - the sort of division that Jesus himself experienced with his own family as they didn’t understand what he was doing, thought he was mad and tried to stop him (Matt 12:48-50, Mk 3:20-34)

And this can be very real and painful - particularly if we are the only believer in a family, and suddenly we are living according to different values and with different emphases. And I recognise that there are some here this morning for whom this is the case and at times this can be really, really difficult.

And it can be even worse in other cultures:

- An Indian friend of mine - who became a Christian when living in this country - was concerned about how he would be received by his family when he went home
- Someone I met in Israel was treated as dead by his strict Jewish parents - including them having a funeral for him - after becoming a follower of Jesus
- For a Muslim to become a Christian can involve having to walk away from their entire culture and way of life - not always by choice but because of that society excluding them

But even outside of that - in our relatively easier contexts - someone choosing to really follow Jesus can cause real tensions and strains in a family.

- Even coming to a service like this means time away from family when other members of the family might want to be doing something different
- Finding time to read the Bible and to pray can be difficult
- Getting involved in different activities for Jesus and the kingdom of God can be met with disapproval

And it can be the easy way out to compromise, to put family first, to fit Jesus in when we can and when it doesn't impact anyone else. And this isn't only true when only some people in the family are believers - there are so many demands on families, on parents and children, these days that even if everyone is totally committed to following Jesus it can be easy for the demands of the world around us to take first place.

So how do we respond to this call of Jesus?

- We need to remember the responsibility we have to our own families - people whom we love and care for deeply, people we are committed to, people who are so intimately part of our own lives
- We need to seek opportunities to share the good news of Jesus with those who don't yet know him - and we can do this by how we behave, what we do and what we say
- We need to seek opportunities to encourage other believers in our family to grow closer to Jesus
- But - in all of that - we need to recognise and acknowledge that Jesus calls for, and deserves, the first place in our lives. And for each of us the way that works out will be different, but the principle is the same for all of us - this is part of what it means to "have what it takes to follow Jesus"

2.2 Taking up a cross

Many Christians today wear a cross as a piece of jewellery, some because they like it - others as a sign of their commitment to Jesus.

But for people in the time of Jesus the cross was an awful sight, a promise of suffering and death, something to be avoided at all costs. Even associating yourself with someone carrying a cross could be a dangerous thing to do.

People would have seen processions through the streets of a man carrying the upper beam of a cross - often bound and beaten, under the control of rough soldiers, being led outside the city to suffer an agonising death. It was the sign of a criminal, of someone who had gone against the state, it was an example to others to encourage them to fall in line.

Jesus knew that this awaited him and as time went by it would have loomed larger in his awareness. He would, one day, be paraded through Jerusalem carrying his cross as he was led out to die. And most of his followers would have deserted him and abandoned him to his fate as it was too dangerous to be with him.

And here, before those awful events, Jesus challenges his followers to be prepared to do the same - to go the way of the cross, to be prepared to follow a path of suffering, to be prepared to leave behind a life of peaceful ease and to step out in service and obedience, recognising it would be costly and painful.

And so the challenge of Jesus comes down to us - which do we value more: a peaceful life or being obedient to him? And recognising that obedience comes with a price just as it did for him.

What cross is Jesus calling you to carry? Are you prepared to pick it up and follow Him?

2.3 **Losing our lives**

And then Jesus challenges us as to whether we are trying to find ourselves or whether we are trying to find ourselves in him. Is our focus and attention on achieving what we want to achieve in life or is it about recognising his power and authority over our lives and seeking what he wants?

For some listening to Jesus it would mean literally giving up their lives for him - for all it is about whether we are prepared to give up our ambitions and dreams, be fully committed to him and to seek what he wants for our lives.

And as we think about that question, let's remember that Jesus loves us completely and fully - more than we can ever imagine - and so wants what is absolutely the best for our lives, even if it isn't quite what we had hoped for ourselves.

And so we come back full circle to where we started - it is only when we are prepared to recognise and accept the disruptive call that Jesus makes on our lives that we can live the lives we are meant to live, the lives that are in step with God's plans and purposes for us, the lives where we can really experience God's peace even when going through difficulty and suffering.

3. **Being worthy of Jesus**

Jesus calls for a lot - he calls for the first place in our lives, he calls for us to be prepared to suffer for him, he calls for us to find ourselves in him and not in our own ideas.

This is not just about making a decision to follow Jesus - although that is vitally important. It's about making that decision to be a fully committed follower of Jesus with some understanding of what that might cost.

Why would people sign up for this?

Surely it's because we recognise something of who Jesus is, something of what he was prepared to do for us, something of how much he loves us, and recognising that it is only when we align ourselves with him that we can experience life as it was really meant to be.

It's not that we are called to weigh up the benefits of following Jesus, find they are better than not doing so, and so agree to follow him. But that we fully commit ourselves to him because of who he is, his love for us and our love for him.

How are we going to respond to this challenging call of Jesus on our lives?