

Sunday Gospel Reflection for 14th Sunday of the Year, Sunday July 3rd

By Brian Maher OMI



If Jesus had a Facebook page, would you join it as a ‘friend’? or if he tweeted regularly would you be a ‘follower’ of his?

Asking questions like these may well sound trite and meaningless, and come across as more juvenile than anything else, and perhaps they are. However, read today’s Gospel a couple of times and then look at the questions again.

Jesus says: “If you want a comfortable life, forget it! – I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.”

“If you want wealth, or possessions, or popularity, I’m not the one to follow! “Bring no money, no spare clothes, or shoes, greet no one along the way.”

“If you want to stand before others, independent and strong, sorry again! “Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you.”

Somehow, I can’t see many people rushing to subscribe to a channel promising only the things we value least!

If, by chance, you are a digital dinosaur, have no idea what Facebook is and Twitter is what you told your two-year- old “little birdies do”, then think of today’s Gospel like this:

Suppose you are a person committed to your Religion’s beliefs and values and struggle to bring your children up to share this commitment. Now suppose you read of a new charismatic figure

who is making waves within your Church. He or she seems to accept most of the laws and rules of your Religion, but not all of them. And worse, the laws he or she doesn't accept they seem to ignore!

A bit later you read that he or she has had some fairly serious disputes with your Religious leaders – priests, Bishops and even higher. And worse, he has called them hypocrites to their faces.

Now suppose your thirteen-year-old son or daughter comes and tells you that this person is visiting your Church in a few weeks and asks your permission to attend the event. "Don't worry", they tell you, "...it's in the Church so it's safe."

When you check with other parents, they tell you that his message sounds like a journey to nowhere, and his lifestyle closer to that of a 60's 'hippie', than the values of success and ambition you wish your children to embrace.

What do you do? Say 'yes' for the sake of peace and because you like to see yourself as open minded? or do you say 'no' because your child is at an 'impressionable age' and you don't want him or her exposed to someone who breaks Church laws (even some of them) and criticises Church leaders. "Anyway..." you tell yourself, "...what's to say this isn't some new cult starting up?"

Once again, the person who speaks the words of today's Gospel is exactly the person described above. Would you really want your child listening to him speak the words of this Gospel?

For all the best reasons in the world I doubt very much if I would be allowing my child to attend such an event.

It is easy with hindsight to see the good of what Jesus said and to accept his words as being "the Word of the Lord", ... but...at the time he said them, when he was little more than an itinerant preacher, his words and actions might have seemed quite different.

In his lifetime Jesus did not have a huge number of followers. How could he? Everything he said and did was uncompromisingly challenging.

His words sounded nice...'in theory', but in 'real life' they led only to weakness, being walked-on and ignored. Who wants to forgive when they can get even? Gentleness and tolerance are for losers; domination and power are for winners. Who wants to be a lamb when everyone knows the wolf always wins!

And it wasn't just the words of Jesus either. Look at what he did: He ate with sinners and tax collectors, he spent time with known prostitutes, lepers, and outcasts. Who would want to be seen with people like these? He favoured the poor and unashamedly made them his priority. Why spend time and energy on people with no influence or who can give you nothing back?

Jesus wouldn't have used the word but, in fact, the values he espoused and the lifestyle he lived were 'countercultural', meaning that they were opposed to the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of his time. Even if one liked the ideals he presented, living them, or even speaking of them would, at best, lead to unpopularity, and, at worst, lead to persecution. Pope Francis in "The Joy of the Gospel" (269) put it this way: "Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is nothing else than the culmination of the way he lived his entire life." When everything one says and does challenge the accepted norms of society, rejection and harassment are inevitable.

The values of the Gospel were countercultural in the time of Jesus, and they are still countercultural today. There is no way of escaping it.

It is quite true that Jesus sends us out like 'lambs among wolves' because the attitudes of our society: ambition, success, win at all costs, materialism, power, wealth, competition, individualism, etc. are far more highly valued than gentleness, patience, peace, tolerance, forgiveness, compassion, etc.

It is also true that if Jesus was coming to give a talk in our local Church, we would be wise to consider whether we wanted to expose your teenage children to the challenges to which they would undoubtedly be exposed.

Being in our world without house or purse, or sandals or sack is not easy. It exposes us to the cruelty of selfishness, arrogance, ridicule, betrayal, hatred, or maybe worst of all, simply being dismissed and ignored by others. These are the crosses Jesus tells us we must "take up daily" if we want to follow him.

There is, however, a danger we must be extremely careful of, if we are to be authentically countercultural in the Christian sense. Historically, many countercultural groups have used 'protest', 'fear' or 'shock' to confront what they see as unjust or hypocritical. Rallies and protests which break civil laws can so easily be drawn into aggression or violence. We don't need to look very far to see lots of examples of this. Some groups use 'fear' or even 'terror' to hit back at what they see as mainstream values. One need only think of the far-right, neo-Nazi groups to see this. For others, types of music, sex, drugs, extremely vulgar language or nudity are used to 'shock' society into seeing countercultural values. The 'Hippie' movement of the 60's, the development of Punk Rock, etc. were all ways of trying to 'shock' society into an awareness of materialism, war and hypocrisy.

All of these are 'dangers', because nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus resort to protest, fear or shock when presenting his message to his hearers. Today's Gospel makes this so clear: "Into whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this household. If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on them; but if not it will return to you." In the longer version of the Gospel Jesus goes on to tell his disciples how to deal with rejection and opposition. They are "to shake the very dust of the street from their feet..." and leave the town.

The Kingdom of God being revealed by Jesus has no place in it for violence, aggression, fear or shock. Indeed accepting the Kingdom of God means rejecting them in all their guises.

Even peace is countercultural in a society where 'the end justifies the means' and being first is all that matters.

Yes indeed, Jesus sends us out "like lambs among wolves", but he also says to us, "do not be afraid".

A contradiction? Yes, except that Jesus himself has gone before us, his Death and Resurrection showing the victory of peace over violence, gentleness over domination, compassion over judgement, and friendship over suspicion.

Jesus is the 'Good Shepherd' who walks in front of, and protects his lambs. The wolves may howl and roar and prance all around us but the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of peace and joy and patience and gentleness, has been revealed in Jesus and is here to stay.

St. Paul, as usual, puts it far better than I could ever do:

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, revealed to us in Jesus." (Romans 8:35,38)

Many thanks,

Brian.

If you have any comments, questions or thoughts on this scripture reflection, please feel welcome to email me at b.maher@oblates.ie

Gospel

Luke 10:1-9

Jesus Sends Out the Seventy-Two

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.

"When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"

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