

Matthew 10:24-39^v vi

"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. 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 her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

^v About the Gospel: Matthew 10:24-39

Today's reading is a part of Jesus' instructions to the Twelve (10:1-42), whom he sends out to continue his ministry. Much of the material in the first

section is found in Mark and Luke, not in their mission discourses, but in the eschatological discourses near the end of the gospels (Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19). The same kind of warnings are found also in the farewell discourse in John (chaps. 14–16). Matthew, however, indicates that he sees persecution as part of the normal life of the Church rather than as a special sign of the end.

Matthew exhorts Christians to fearless confession. Disciples are encouraged three times (10:26, 28, 31) not to fear what any person can do. In contrast to fearing people, the fear of God is an open, reverent, humble awe. This trust in God bestows fearlessness upon all disciples. The death and resurrection of Jesus show that those who kill the body cannot separate disciples from God and from fullness of life. The denial or acknowledgement of Christ is the touchstone of each disciple's destiny.

^{vi} **Reflection and Response**

Today's gospel confronts us sharply with the reality of discipleship in New Testament times. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body," advises Jesus, and we remember that death was a daily possibility for those who walked with Jesus and those who joined the Church after his death and resurrection.

Those of us who still face political persecution and death may find comfort in its older, sterner meaning of strength in this passage, remembering that risk always was part of the Christian commitment. But those of us who are sure of our daily bread and who know ourselves to be safely sheltered from political persecution for our faith are troubled by these memories of what our faith could demand.

Of course, there are social consequences to being a professing Christian. One woman tells how she was buttonholed by a colleague who assured her that all Christians were simple-minded bigots. An evening of television would convince us that Christians are among the last groups in America that can be safely ridiculed.

But in our hearts we know that these problems do not compare with the risk of exile, imprisonment and death still faced by many in the world today. What then do we have to fear?

We can fear our own faithlessness. We embody the Church as the sleeping servant, waiting for our Master to come. How easy it can be in our 20th-century sleep to forget for whom we wait, to trade in the dream of God's kingdom for the more easily attained American dream. Why should we not devote all our strength to our career, our family and our security? What difference could it make? What

difference could we make?

We cannot know. The test of our commitment can come so unexpectedly that we find ourselves unprepared. Was it like that for Jeremiah and his friends? Jeremiah, at the risk of his life, found himself compelled to speak out against the sins and abuses of his own beloved people. Which of his friends stopped his ears to the compelling call of God? Which of them turned away rather than risk the security they had achieved?

During World War II, many turned their eyes away as Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, trade unionists and others were taken to the Nazi death camps. In the United States, many refused to risk their security as their Japanese-American neighbors were forcibly relocated to inland concentration camps.

But there were notable exceptions. In Europe, there were families who risked their own lives to hide Jewish neighbors. In America, there were those who protected the homes and wealth of their Japanese-American friends until they could reclaim them after their release.

We may never be given such a dramatic opportunity to witness to the compelling call of God to risk all for the kingdom, but we prepare ourselves by our fidelity in daily life. We work, but as citizens of another land. We love our families, but as gifts from God. We place our security only in Jesus' call to risk every protection and comfort for him.

And who knows what fruit our fidelity can bear? Paul reminds us that grace and life come to us from the obedience of Jesus Christ. We who are his body are called to follow his obedience precisely that his gifts of grace and life may be manifested through us.

“Do not be afraid,” says Jesus. But do not be comfortable, either, he might add. Keep your eyes on the kingdom, work and wait. The call of God is for you.