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Sermon

His Eye is on the Sparrow

Matthew 10:16-39

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Last week we heard Jesus give instructions for the first mission of the twelve Apostles. They were sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel – they were not to go the neighbouring Gentiles. Now from verse 16 onwards, the focus has changed. The verbs has changed from present tense to future. There is mention of being called before Gentile rulers which would not happen on the first mission since they were confined to Galilee and told to stay away from the Gentiles and Samaritans. What we are hearing from verse 16 onwards is instructions for the longer term.

He said, they were going like vulnerable sheep among wolves so they would need to be as wise or sensible as serpents and as innocent as doves. If we are only shrewd we may become crafty and devious. If we are only innocent, we may be naïve and foolish. There is a balance to be held and Jesus says they must become like this – there was to be a growing into wise innocence.

He warned them of opposition from both Jewish and Gentile authorities and assures them that they will be given inspired words to speak before rulers. We see this happening in the Book of Acts. We know that the early church was violently persecuted. Nonetheless, researchers say that persecution of Christians is numerically greater now than in previous ages. The magazines from the Barnabas Fund each month tell us how much Christians suffer around the world for our faith. It has ever been so – from Abel being killed by Cain and the persecution of the prophets. In our Old Testament lesson, we heard Jeremiah's complaint about the opposition he experienced. As we often hear in the Psalms, Jeremiah started with complaint and ended in praise. When we feel like complaining to God about our lot, perhaps we can learn from him and the Psalmist. We can tell God how we feel and then come through to a place of praise.

Jesus warned that even families would be split over loyalty to him. Of course, in many cultures conversion is seen as a disloyalty and a threat. Conflict follows between those who have come to follow Christ and those who have not. That same divide happens even in families in our culture, since deep allegiance to Christ will be resisted from those who do not share it. However, as followers of Christ our first loyalty is to him.

In the midst of these warnings, Jesus gives them and us hope. People lied about Jesus. He was accused of doing miracles by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. They may lie about us – but he says, "Don't be afraid." What is the most common instruction in the Bible? Don't be afraid. They may lie about you, but he assures us that the truth will out. Everything that is hidden will be revealed. We will be vindicated - in time.

You may be afraid for your life – but he says be more afraid of God who has the power to destroy both body and soul in hell. The fear of God is not slavish grovelling. It is deep respect and awe because of his holiness, his power and his mercy. It is a profound desire to please God out of respect arising from worship. When we fear God, we don't want to go against his ways. It puts other fears into perspective. While we are to fear God,

Jesus assures us that our Father cares deeply for us. To help us grasp that, Jesus gives the example of the sparrows.

Birds are sold cheaply in the market – he says two were sold for the smallest coin of his day, the asarion equal to 1/16th of a day's wages. Jesus said, even though a sparrow is of little value, God knows when one dies and indeed it doesn't happen outside his will. Jesus continues by saying even the hairs on your head are all counted. God knows every detail about you and your life.

I know I have told this story here before but some of you weren't here and it bears repetition. I used to walk to work in Newmarket and one day as I walked under some street trees, I came across a nestling chick on the pavement. It had virtually no feathers. I stopped and looked at it and was sorry that it would probably be eaten by a cat. I walked on thinking about how if I touched it the mother would reject it anyway and how could I possibly get it back into its nest. Then I prayed to God that his word says he knows when a sparrow falls to the ground and could he save this one? I stopped and went back. As I watched it started flutter and scabble its way across the pavement to the grass. I watched and prayed. It managed to get across the grass to the trunk of the tree. Then to my astonishment, with much thrashing of its bare wings and scrabbling at the bark with its claws, somehow it managed to climb the tree trunk until it disappeared from my sight among the foliage. I went on my way praising God.

But there was a sequel to the story. Later, my cousin's infant son was diagnosed with leukaemia and they came to Auckland for his treatment. In praying with them for Stephen, I drew on that event with the sparrow as a reminder of God's care even for a sparrow and as Jesus says, "You are worth more than many sparrows – so don't be afraid." That was a comfort to my cousin and his wife in that stressful time. And Stephen – well he is now a robust and healthy man in his prime.

Jesus said to the apostles and he says to us today, "Don't be afraid! You are worthy more than many sparrows and my Father cares about each sparrow and what happens to it."

As the old song goes: "I sing because I'm happy; / I sing because I'm free: / His eye is on the sparrow / And I know He watches me."

In his commentary on Matthew, N.T. Wright writes¹:

I have sometimes heard worthy and serious Christian preachers telling congregations off for imagining that it might be appropriate to pray for quite trivial things: a parking space on a busy street, fine weather for an outdoor event at the church, for some lost article to turn up. Of course, there are more important things to pray for, and we should be sure we are doing that. But if God really takes note of every single sparrow in the sky, and every single hair of our heads, that means that just as nothing is too great for him to do, so nothing is too small for him to care about.

In the present context, the message is plain. You are worth more than a great many sparrows, so rest assured that God knows and cares about the details of your life, even as you face the temptations and dangers which so easily surround you. Followers of Jesus are bound to expect attacks at all levels. But they should also learn that the one they are serving is stronger than the strongest opponent they will ever meet.

Jesus assures us that if we confess him in front of people – that is publicly declare our loyalty to him - then he will do the same about us in front of God the Father in heaven.

Friends, this gospel passage has its challenges. Discipleship is glorious yet demanding. But through it all he promises to help us. Through it all he says, "Don't be afraid!" Through it all, Jesus tells us knows every detail of our lives and he cares about us.

So don't be afraid. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches you.

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¹ Wright, N.T., 2002, *Matthew for Everyone*, SPCK, London, p120.