

Sermon for Sunday 25th June 2017 (Second Sunday After Trinity)

Chris Walker, Licensed Reader

As most of you know, Tony and I will be moving away fairly soon. One of the things that I am going to miss very much about our home in Bretton is my room at the end of the garden that functions as my study. If I sit on the right hand side, with the door open, I have a good view of the pond, which is put to good use by the birds for drinking and bathing during spell of dry weather.

As I was mulling over today's readings, Mr and Mrs Blackbird were making good use of the facilities. When they departed, a little sparrow flew down to take her turn. I was able to watch through binoculars, and to reflect on what an exquisitely beautiful thing a little bird is. I have no idea how many sparrows, or indeed varieties of sparrows there may be in the world, but I liked the idea that Jesus was at one time watching sparrows, too, and reflecting about the Father knowing the lifespan of each one. That God sees each hatchling, each first flight, each last fall.

So, too, with us. Jesus tells us that every hair on our head is counted. That's about seven billion of us on earth, and I'm fairly sure those with no hair are not excluded. We are known, we are marked, we are noticed, we matter. To God if not, sadly, always to each other. And what is initially comforting is, when we think further on it, perhaps less comfortable when we think that God the Father knows, marks and cares about all the ways in which my actions and decisions affect other whom he loves.

The impact of my living, like a bird bathing in my pond, sends out ripples. Those ripples affect not only those closest to me, but those who make the goods I buy, and those who may feel the impact of my carbon footprint.

So maybe this passage about sparrows and the hairs on our heads does not stand in quite such sharp contrast to the rest of the passage as seems to be the case at first glance. Jesus says some things that are difficult and perplexing, if not actually chilling to hear in today's gospel. He repeats several times 'don't be afraid', when talking about those who threaten physical violence against his hearers. We know that we face those in every age. We are quite used to hearing the words 'don't be afraid', which is apparently the most frequently repeated command in the Bible.

But here we also have Jesus saying BE afraid: 'fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell.' Former bishop and eminent biblical scholar, Tom

Wright, urges us not to misunderstand Jesus' words here. The 'he' that can destroy both body and soul in hell, the 'he' that is referred to is most assuredly not God the Father. Jesus knows that there is a strong undercurrent of anger about oppression and injustice and executions of Jews by the Roman authorities and the complicity of Herod. He knows, too, and foretells in other passages what the outcome of an angry uprising will be: the destruction of Jerusalem. We have seen the results of uprisings in Syria and Yemen: the appalling injuries, loss of life and homelessness and, now in Yemen, water and sanitation systems are so degraded that over 1,000 have died of cholera.

Tom Wright says this: 'But there were other, darker enemies, who had the power to kill the soul as well: enemies who were battling for that soul even now, during Jesus' ministry, and were using the more obvious enemies as a cover....the demonic powers that are greedy for the soul of God's people are using their (i.e. the people's) very desire for justice and vengeance as the bait on the hook. The people of light are never more at risk than when they are lured into fighting the darkness with more darkness. This is the road straight to the smouldering rubbish tip, to Gehenna, and Jesus wants his followers to be well aware of it.'

Wright's translation of the word 'hell' in the passage is this word 'Gehenna' which, as I'm sure you know, was a real place, a fiery dump outside of the city of Jerusalem. Jesus' words carry implications for both the immediate future and for God's final judgement. In physical terms, a violent uprising will result in the dreamed-of glorious city being reduced to a smouldering ruin, which is what came to pass and may well have been witnessed by some of the younger people who were there to hear Jesus words that day.

But the effect on our souls of being seduced by the desire to revenge and control is far worse: thinking to build God's kingdom by violence and oppression does not result in a glorious city. If you are watching the dramatization of Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale', you will see it resulting in a very hell on earth. In real life, think of the Hitler's Germany, think of people fleeing from areas controlled by Isis/so-called Islamic State. People who are disillusioned, volunteer soldiers who have found themselves trapped, overcome with horror and loathing at the truth that is exposed. Jesus warns us sternly that to follow that path will also result in our souls being exiled from the New Jerusalem, able only to watch from the dump of our own making: there is no place for human control and violence in the kingdom of God, as his final judgement will show.

It is important not to end without being clear that Jesus is not advocating appeasement. Just putting up with and going along with the status quo for a safe and quiet life. Far from it. He knows perfectly well that his teaching will upset

many people, and not only those in authority. 'I have come not to bring peace, but a sword'. Friendships and family relationships will come under threat from divided opinions. Nonetheless, as new truth is revealed, standing up for that truth must be more important than keeping others happy. Jesus doesn't spell out for us how to deal with this: can we assume that we are expected to do everything possible to continue living together? So many things divide us in this world: culture, politics and doctrine. We may remember Paul's words in Romans 12:18 'If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with your neighbour.' But never at the cost of your soul. As we make progress in our lives as disciples, we must not be afraid to change as God wants to change us, even if it ruffles the feathers of others. Let the one to whom we surrender our souls be the one who counts the hairs on our heads, and let us live and speak as he commands us.