

SERMON: PENTECOST THREE

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Good morning everyone.

Many will be relieved that I will not be mentioning COVID 19 this morning though it is vital as an issue at the moment and we have needed to hear much about it in other situations.

Instead we are going to focus on one of the most puzzling and misunderstood sayings of Jesus in this densely packed gospel passage.

Here we find Jesus saying that his followers can expect the worst outcomes:

We will be called devils and the devil's servants (just as he was).

We will be maligned and misunderstood by even our closest family (as he was).

We will have to be prepared even for death, so we must bring along our own cross (as he did).

In other words he is telling us to be ready to be treated like him if we follow him. The servant will be treated no better than the master.

This is a sobering thought and not the way to win friends and influence people to join your movement. Imagine a politician promising people "blood, sweat and tears" and to alienate you from your family if we were to go his way; he would have a very small vote!

But is this all Jesus is saying here?

What is clear and foremost in this passage is that Jesus is asking his followers to weigh up what it will mean to be his people. He has said as much in other places as in Luke 9:37-62, where this theme appears three times:

"I will follow you wherever you go" says a man. Jesus responds that foxes have holes and birds have nests but he does not have a place to go.

Another asks to be allowed to go and bury his father, a sacred and significant obligation in Judaism, but even this is met with: "Leave the dead to bury the dead. Follow me!"

The final man asks to be allowed to say goodbye to those at home. He is told: "No-one having put their hand to the plow and looks back is worth of the kingdom."

These are absolute demands. God's kingdom must have the top priority. So we must weigh up carefully what following Christ means.

We see this message echoed in the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 (and Luke 18). He asked the right question about being ready for the Age to come (the age of the kingdom of God), and had kept the commandments faithfully. Yet when asked to sacrifice his great riches and then follow Jesus "turned away sorrowful"

Matthew 6:33 says as much: "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these other things (food, clothing etc) will take their place."

So to be real followers of Jesus we must weigh our commitment and make it the first priority in our life, though he promises it will mean we are maligned and even “crucified,” metaphorically or even literally.

These are not easy words to listen to, let alone live out.

Does Jesus offer an easy way out or that God will save us from the promised troubles?

No he does not.

What he does offer is in two parts:

All will be revealed. What has been done secretly- the abuse of power, the greed, the evil scheming, the greed and the malice, will be known to all for what it was.

The faithfulness of the people of God will also be shown for what it really was.

Though it may have been portrayed as old-fashioned, rigid, superstitious nonsense, lies or anything else, it will be also shown in its true light.

And it is this faithfulness that Jesus says will be recognized by him to his Father, who is Our Father, and rewarded in ways we cannot even yet imagine.

Some more on this faithfulness: What is it?

It is not firstly seen as religiousness or as a religion as understood in modern terms. It is far greater than that.

Christianity is a lifestyle based on relationships with the unique God of the Universe, shown to us in his son Jesus Christ and brought into our daily lives by his Spirit. The relationships involved extends to our fellow believers, to ourselves and also to our family and community. All parts of our lives are effected. These relationships work on a process of learning that continues throughout our life in the interaction of prayer, worship and being the Christian community.

St Paul in Romans 12.2 sets it out:

“Don’t be conformed to this world’s pattern (“Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould” says J B Phillips), but be transformed (metamorphosed from a grub to a butterfly is the image here), by the renewing of t your mind (“nous” in Greek meaning the mind/understanding).

Paul had said that for this process to occur we must present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our reasonable service.”

Can you hear the echoes of “take up your cross” here in Paul?

We are to be ready, in following Jesus, to be changed in all our hopes, dreams and disappointments, to be changed in every way, to be renewed, with nothing held back.

No secrets, no lack of forgiveness, no malice or anger or desire for vengeance is to be held back in our total offering of all we are to Christ so he can remake us in his image.

In doing so as his servants we will gain his approval in that Last Day, when nothing will count more than that approval. May we all hear: “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.” Amen!

