

Sunday 25th June, 2017 - 3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Year A
Genesis 21:8-21
Psalm 86:1-10.16-17
Romans 6:1-11
Matthew 10:24-39

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Some of you may be familiar with the name Ethel Waters. Many of you are probably not. Born in the early years of the 20th century, Ethel Waters was an American singer and actress. She frequently performed jazz, big band, and pop music on the Broadway stage and in concerts, but she began her career in the 1920s singing blues. Of all of the hits (which included a little number called "Stormy Weather" - you may have heard of that one!) in that genre, she may best be remembered for the classic Spiritual song "His Eye is on the Sparrow".

In her later years, Waters used to tour with Billy Graham, as he travelled around on his crusades, and this song was often the highlight of the event - crowds would be waiting with bated breath for her to launch into it. The song includes these lyrics: "I sing because I'm happy, / I sing because I'm free, / His eye is on the sparrow, / And I know he watches me."

The song was inspired by the passage of Scripture that we have from Matthew's Gospel today, and indicated Ethel Water's complete and utter trust in her God, a God whom she believed cared deeply for her. To me, the remarkable thing about Ethel Waters is that her life was anything but straightforward, and if you looked at it, you might well ask how it is she had such a belief.

Ethel Waters knew fear and pain. Her birth resulted from the rape of her teenage mother, a girl reportedly only 14 years old. Waters herself then grew up without a father, and in severe poverty.

In her autobiography, she writes that she never lived in the same place more than fifteen months. "I never was a child", she said. "I never was cuddled, or liked, or understood by my family." She married when she was thirteen, left that abusive man, then worked as a maid in Philadelphia for .75c a week.

And yet, despite all that, Waters testified of God's providential care: "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me."

There is a sense in which Jesus' words today cause that same sort of disconnect within me that I see in the reality of Ethel Waters' troubled upbringing, and her faith. You see, on the one hand Jesus makes the promise that God cares; that God's eye is truly on the sparrow (and by extension, on us). But the majority of today's passage is deeply troubling. "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother". "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

These are not words that we are used to hearing from the mouth of our Saviour. And yet, as we live in the world today, they are the very sort of thing we see enacted all around us in the world - conflicts which have global impact, but which at their heart are about tribal, or what we might call family disputes. Terror which seems so indiscriminate that Muslim could just as easily be the target as could Christian. Domestic violence at a level today which requires the actual tallying of deaths of women in our country killed by their partners, or former partners. Truly horrifying...

Division and discord are an inescapable part of our life in this world. Every headline or news caption seems to blare this reality. Every family experiences the pain of this reality at one point or another. Every person here today has been marked by this reality. This is not news to you, I'm sure.

Much of that discord is avoidable and unnecessary. That's the tragedy, but also the truth, of our condition, and we can commit ourselves to healing it where possible.

But some of that discord is unavoidable and a result of living with integrity, of sharing the truth of the Gospel, and of bearing witness to the grace of God we have encountered in Christ. This is also a tragedy - that people should suffer for bearing witness to the Jesus - but one that, to be perfectly honest, will be far less a reality in most of our lives than in the lives of the first-century Christian community to whom Matthew is writing.

Less a reality for us at one level, at least. But the words of truth that Jesus speaks to his disciples does apply to us. He says to them, and to us today “if you anticipate a lack of resistance to the truth of which I am asking you to speak, well, I have news for you.” The Kingdom of Heaven is not a tranquil or quiet existence free from disturbance and discord. Rather, the Kingdom of Heaven disrupts. The Kingdom of Heaven is unsettling.

The Kingdom of Heaven calls into question the rulers and systems that promise peace but in doing so wield a sword of terror and weapons of forced allegiance, armed with what they think is power. The Kingdom of Heaven comes with the demands on which true peace insists -- and never lets go of the kind of peace God has in mind.

This is Jesus’ truth telling at its best. No sugarcoating. Because when you stand up and speak out for what you believe, people start falling away. Believing in Jesus -- really believing in what Jesus says, what Jesus stands for, and then admitting it -- is risky business. Relationships will change. Indeed relationships could very well end. That is, in part, what Jesus is saying. What happens when you stand up for what you believe? Nothing will be the same.

How can we have the courage to do this? I suspect the simple truth is that we can’t - not by ourselves, anyway. And this is why Jesus stresses the promise also contained within the Gospel today - God is with us. Still. God in Jesus was with those disciples in his day and among Matthew’s community who suffered for their faith.

God is with those disciples today who live in parts of the country where they continue to suffer for their faith in ways we will likely never experience and can scarce imagine. And God is with us amid the discords in our personal lives, families, communities, congregations, nation, and world.

“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.”

“Do not be afraid” - the hallmark of the Gospel and words we cannot say too frequently in a world so marked by fear. “You are of great value” - the promise of God in Jesus and words we need to say and hear again and again in a world that values us more for what we can buy than almost anything else.

So many people in the world live in fear - of being alone, of not having a job, of being judged for their skin color rather than character, of losing their health - or who do not feel valued (by friends, family, even their church). Such a thought is overwhelming, and it can cripple and paralyse us. So we need to hear again, and again, and again, that promise that Jesus gives today, so that we might join with Ethel Waters in her unending song: "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 the name of God, Amen.