**Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew** (10:24-39)

‘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 unperceived by 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.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

The gospel passage we heard this morning is a continuation of last week’s, when Jesus’ disciples became apostles – people sent out into the world to be his ministers among the people. Having given them authority to go and heal and preach and teach, here he is, preparing them for what the mission field might be like.

And part of that preparation – for all of us – is working out who we are in any new context. I know some of you don’t believe me, but I promise it is true: I am an introvert and I am shy by nature. …

I had completed the first year of vicar school, keeping under the radar, joining in but staying out of the limelight. Like many of us, I had imposter syndrome: what am I doing here, and how will I manage when they discover that I am here under false pretences and have nothing to offer?

It was only when the new Reception class, as it were, arrived, as I started my second year, that I realised ,suddenly but with some force, that it was down to me to welcome them, to speak to complete strangers and help them to settle into this place and into this community that I had grown to love.

Who was I? Well, I wasn’t a new kid anymore; I needed to stop hiding, to step out – however reluctantly - and start reassuring the new kids, rather than worrying about what they thought of me.

Who am I? I am a member of a family, a community of God.

And whose am I? I am a child of God, believed by God, with a part to play in God’s church.

And whose strength am I doing this in? Not mine. God’s.

There are various points in this gospel reading where we are given some sense of the answer to that question about who we all are. Jesus says: the disciple is not greater than the teacher; it is enough to be like the teacher. Who are we? We are like the teacher; we are like Jesus; we are Christ-like people.

A friend of mine went on a training day and was introduced to a report called, I think, MOVE, which had researched about 1000 congregations in the United States. And one of the things it found was that the overwhelming characteristic that makes a thriving church thrive is that sense of being formed to be Christ-like.

Who else are we? We are precious. It might be that sparrows are two a penny, but every hair of your head is numbered – every last little bit of us is known by God and treasured by God. And if this lockdown has meant we have more grey hairs than previously, or need a haircut, or haven’t had our nails done in three months, or have put on the coronavirus half-stone, that doesn’t matter to God. We are precious.

And who else are we? This bit is hard. That bit about: I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter in law against her mother in law… it simply means that our foundational identity is not our family identity; fundamentally, we are Christ’s. We belong, at the very root of our being, to Christ. Yes of course, we love our families, deeply and fiercely, but our love for our families flows out of that foundation of belonging to and being loved by God.

And what about taking up our cross and losing our lives? As we set off out as Christ’s people, we have to remember that carrying a cross was a shameful thing to do. And we too might get teased, we might get challenged, we might get treated as objects of fun, but that is a dimension we have to embrace if we know ourselves to be his – and whatever we face is going to be much less that those apostles faced, and much less than Christians elsewhere in the world continue to face today.

So while this gospel reading at first sight might have looked to be a bit of a hotch potch of ‘stuff’, we find that it is about our identity as the family of Christ.

And at the same time, it’s sort of a list of what we shouldn’t be frightened of: we shouldn’t be frightened of having our reputations knocked about, nor of families being fractured. Life is often more battlefield than country garden, but Do not fear is something we hear time and again in the Bible.

In all of this, Jesus had to be tough in order to prepare them properly for the job – and if we say ‘ouch’ when we get to the bit about setting father against son and all that, we just have to remember that God’s love for us is not like our human love for one another. Which does not denigrate our human love for one another at all: but it reminds us that our church family is important. It’s not a game of cards. We can’t just play at Happy Families. We need to take it seriously and work at it – and be prepared to step up for each other.

And eventually all of this ‘Who am I’ stuff comes back to where we were last week – the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. If we know who we are, and we know whose we are, and we can start to see in whose strength we do what we do, then it is a very small step to seeing what we have to do next.

To be an apostle of Christ is to be committed not only to Christ and not only to the church family but also to the mission of the church. And the mission of the church is to be the love of Christ in all situations of life.

The mission of the church is exactly what we said last week: to tell other people the Good News and to speak out for social justice and compassion.

There’s an American saying: every child should have a glass of milk and two cookies before they go to bed every night. But Jesus would add - so we must add: every child **in the world** should have a glass of milk and two cookies before they go to bed every night.

And that is what was so fabulous about Marcus Rashford’s campaign, which came to fruition last week: he’s not a young man who is hungry; he’s not a young man who goes without anything he needs – but he is prepared to stand up for those who have no voice and who do go without. And he doesn’t want that for them.

We need more Marcus Rashfords – but mostly we just need more people who acknowledge that they are Christ-like people, that they belong to Christ and that they are doing what they do in His strength.

A very good friend of mine, a primary headteacher in Cornwall, had on the wall of his study these words: If not me, who? If not now, when?

**Amen**