

Rejecting God (Trinity III, 2025 – 6th July)

Luke 10:1-11;16-20.

Whoever listens to you, listens to me. Whoever rejects you, rejects me. Whoever rejects me, rejects the one who sent me.

In a crowded field, that must be a pretty good candidate for the most stupidly dangerous verse in the Bible.

This week, some of you might have been reading reports of the trial of Chris Brain. Brain was a priest in the Church of England, in Sheffield in the Nineties. He was phenomenally successful. He had hundreds of young people turning up to his services. People were coming to faith left, right and centre; their money pouring in too. God was so obviously at work, his Bishop thought. Lots of the normal rules, the normal slow processes, could be set aside for Brain. Fast track him, promote him. Sure, there was the occasional sceptical voice, the occasional person saying he was a bit dodgy, that it might all end in tears, but such people were just whingers, complainers. They're the kind of people who object to anything successful that they themselves haven't done. God was so obviously at work. To reject Brain was to reject Him.

And now, we find ourselves watching his trial on multiple charges of rape and sexual assault, done under the cover of Christian ministry.

That's why verses like this are dangerous.

It's striking, too, that we have this gospel this week – after last week's about Peter being the rock of the church, and the sermon I preached thinking about how that promise might relate to Peter's successors, and the importance of the Papacy in Christianity. We sang that hymn, 'Firmly I believe and truly', and these words in it: 'And I hold in veneration, for the sake of Christ alone, Holy Church as His creation, and her teaching as his own.' *And her teaching as his own.*

Well, maybe there's a sense in which those words are true. And in which we could recognise genuine Peter-like authority in the Pope. But my goodness, there are more obvious senses in which we should be *very* sceptical about both claims. Holy Church – and there's an idea that requires some reflection – has taught some pretty appalling things: about the Jews, about women, about gay people, about people who disagreed with it. About the latter, by the way, teaching was clear. 'Error has no rights'. Because whoever rejects you, said Jesus to his church, rejects me. Whoever rejects me, rejects the one who sent me: God.

So this verse would not be top of my list of the best things Jesus ever said.

Is it anything *other* than stupid and dangerous?

Well, first let's step back a moment, and ask about the whole business of *rejecting* Jesus, rejecting God. What does that actually mean?

It is, I suggest, easily confused with something else which might look and sound the same but is actually very different. *Protesting* against God and *rejecting* God are two very different things. Listen to Job in the Old Testament: 'God has torn me in his wrath, and hated me. He has gnashed his teeth against me, he has set me up as his target; he slashes me open and shows no mercy... though there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure.' (Job 16:9-17). There's a lot more where that came from. Job is unbelievably angry with God. Anger, pain, horror, even maybe at moments hate ... it's all in there. And yet, here's the amazing thing: the Bible applauds him. It sees in his honesty, his cursing of God, real faith, real prayer. He's furious with God, but he hasn't *rejected* God.

So whatever rejection of God is, it's not *protest*. Protest – bitter, fierce, unresolved protest – is part, the Bible says, of the good spiritual life. This is well worth remembering, whenever you want to scream at God; whenever all you can feel about him is anger and pain. Feeling that, and voicing that, isn't sin. Isn't rejection of God. It can be, oddly, sometimes, just what faith looks like.

Nor is rejecting God the same thing as not being religious. Not, that is, believing in Him, or coming to church. Think, after all, about thinking about exactly who might have been

rejecting those disciples Jesus sent. In all probability, they were very religious. There weren't many atheists around in first century Israel. And throughout the Gospels, the ones who seem to have rejected Jesus most fiercely were some of the *most* religious. The ones who cared most deeply about being holy in their own lives, and the holiness of their country. They cared enough to be tooling up to fight for it, in every sense. Against less moral Jews, against the pagan Empire. Just a few years later, they'd be off to holy war.

Listen again, with that in mind, to what Jesus told his friends. I'm sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. You go with a message of peace, and people who share in peace will receive you. But many do not share in peace. They're like wolves, beginning to prowl. They're getting ready to fight. Their hearts are full of violence. They will not hear your message. They will reject my way of peacefulness. They're choosing war, and it will lead them to disaster.

Hear Jesus' words like that, and they're perhaps not so objectionable. Do they though, have any relevance to us? That was a very particular historical situation, first century Israel on the brink of revolt. What do his words have to say to us, in our world?

Well... how about this? Jesus Christ was then, and is now, the opposite of the wolf. He is the supremely gentle one. The one who is peacefulness: who radiates love, mercy and forgiveness. He is holy, yes. He is the one who will judge and end all darkness, all wickedness. But He will do so in a way that never hates, that never despises, that never kills. He will do it by loving and suffering, by surrendering Himself on the Cross. That's the Gospel. We have overlaid it with all sorts of misunderstandings and corruptions and contradictions, but at its heart, that's the message: behold, the Lamb of God, the peaceful one, giving himself away so that the world might live. That's the Gospel.

People reject the Gospel and God every time they choose to live like wolves instead. Every time, that is, that they choose the way of greed, of power, of violence, of devouring others. Every time they exploit and abuse. Every time they exalt themselves over their neighbour.

Every time they hate and despise and condemn. And it will not have escaped your notice that they can do these things – we can do these things – whilst believing in God and being part of his Church. Plenty of good solid Christian people live in deep rejection of God. Not necessarily consciously, not hypocritically ... it's just that wolfishness is scored so deeply into us we don't even notice.

That's why in Matthew 25, say, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, in the last judgement Jesus says people will be surprised. They'll suddenly be shown how they rejected God, or welcomed Him, when they weren't even thinking about Him. How their deep-down relationship to God showed itself in the most secular of ways: in how they visited prisoners, cared for the sick, fed the hungry, clothed the naked – or how they *didn't*. When they chose love and care, they chose God. When they chose self-interest, they rejected Him. In both cases, they didn't even realise what they were doing.

At which point, we should all be trembling a bit. Have we rejected God without knowing it? Not by being the worst people ever, perhaps, hopefully – but just by being wrapped up in ourselves, not loving, not caring? Simply not engaged with those who need us, especially with the weak, the poor. That's your relationship with me, right there, says Jesus. I'm not inside your head, when you close your eyes: I'm right there, in the person you neglect. Whenever you reject them, you reject me.

A certain amount of trembling is absolutely appropriate. To ignore our neighbour – let alone to despise them, or exploit them – is to reject God. To live like that, Jesus teaches again and again, is to end in misery. We need to repent, in sackcloth and ashes.

Yet while that is true, remember the Gospel. Remember who we are dealing with here. Jesus Christ is never just the One who tells you how terrible you are, and how grim your end will be. Yes, he wants you to turn. Yes, your choices matter and yes, ruin is possible. And yet, remember who he is. He is the Peaceful One. The Lamb. The One who will not despise and

condemn and destroy, the One who wants above all to give life. What he tells us to extend to others – love, mercy, care, gentleness – He first of all gives to us. We may have rejected Him, deeply and often. He never rejects us. No matter how wolf-like you have become, no matter how far you have strayed from being what He wants you to be, this is *Jesus* we are talking about. As the prayer says, when we were still far off, you met us in your Son, and brought us home.

Whoever rejects the Gospel rejects me. Whoever rejects me, rejects the one who sent me. He's talking, at some level, about us, each one of us. Today's Gospel is a call to repent: to start living a new kind of life, a life focussed on love and care for all who cross our paths, especially the weakest, the poorest. It's a serious and urgent call. It comes though from a God who even when He judges us, loves us. Whose judgement is never to destroy, but to set right. Who will love us through all our rejecting, love of us out of our rejecting, and make us like Himself.

To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.