

It's another tough teaching from Jesus this week.

At the end of today's Gospel reading, Jesus shares with the disciples the truth about what they can expect from choosing to follow him, he's upfront about what to expect if your whole life, your whole self, is put to work for the co-creation of God's Kingdom on earth; how hard it will be, and how dangerous, to act only and always for love of God and love of neighbor in a world that's been built for other things.

They'll arrest you and persecute you, he says, they'll hand you over ... and you'll be brought before kings ... because of my name. ... you'll be betrayed even by parents ... relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You'll be hated by all because of my name.

That's a lot. It's not much of a pitch for our faith, and it's a long way from the "God is love" message we might share if we're thinking about inviting someone to church. It's not really the "Good News" that's going to have folks racing to grab a pew of a Sunday morning, but it is a sound reminder that the call to faith is for a reason, and it's absolutely not to be taken lightly, following Jesus isn't for the faint of heart.

To understand why Jesus is spelling this out for his disciples, it's worth taking a moment to put his words from today's reading in context - Jesus is speaking to his disciples after a fairly lengthy exchange with the chief priests and the scribes in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes rounded on Jesus while he was teaching. Understandably, these folks, these learned folks, tasked by their community with interpreting and enforcing Torah, God's law, on behalf of the people, and for the people, these folks have been watching and listening to Jesus, an unknown entity, and they wanted to know by whose authority he could or should be doing what he was doing.

Jesus answered their questions as Jesus does, indirectly, and he told a couple of parables – and what he seems to be saying is that the established ‘life of faith,’ the way faith was being lived out, Jesus seems to be saying it had forgotten its primary purpose. God had become secondary to the studying and the learning, to the teaching and the preaching, to the rituals and the practices; God and God’s call for conversion of life had become secondary, to the authority of the temple system and even to the beauty of the building itself.

This is kind of a human-habit, left to our own devices we humans are champions of making our own stuff primary, creating idols out of anything we can build or shape to our own specifications, stuff that we can control, that we can use to satisfy our own needs. We can even come to live for, to love, to protect, and aggressively defend what we’ve built – and what we’ve built can come to take the place of God. - as we’ve done, I might argue, with the church institution in the Western world, many times over, in the last 2 thousand years. A safe faith in what we’ve built, takes the place of a demanding and unpredictable faith in the truth and reality of a mysterious and mighty God.

With his disturbing words about the future, Jesus has his disciples remember what their faith is for, and be aware of the enormous spiritual strength and potential that’s born of that faith. The world is in trouble, the great problems in the world aren’t going away any time soon ... and they will get worse, before they get better, and Jesus lets his disciples know this is the purpose of faith, of the power of the spirit, to have them right where they need to be, right in the middle of the danger of it all, striving for justice and fullness of life for all people, despite the dangers around them.

It doesn't really sound like Good News, but by pointing out the truth of the danger, Jesus is also revealing the colossal personal power that each of his disciples can access through their faith, their faith in God. And that's very Good News indeed, and it's news we need to hear as we think about the future and the role of the church in a world that's still in trouble; it's Good News that reminds us of our reason for existing, and keeps us fully aware of the scope and scale of committing our lives to Christ.

The church today, like the temple was in Jesus' day, is a place of community, of stability and comfort. And it must always be more than that, we must want for it to be more than that. Church is where we're invited to encounter God, and to be changed by that encounter. Church is how and where we're invited to learn to embody the mighty spiritual power that's so often untapped within us. Church must be where the truth and reality of God is primary.

Church is where we can learn how to bring the power of God into our own lives, and learn to trust where that leads us, and learn to trust that we each have the strength and the ability to follow, despite the risks and the fear we might feel given the dangers we will face. Church must be the place that opens us, always, to possibility and transformation, where we practice, practice being receptive to the mysterious and intangible presence of the living God, so we can see Jesus clearly among us. Church must be where we learn to have confidence in the truth of a vast reality that is so much more than what we can see or touch.

Church, where the truth and reality of God through all dimensions of life is primary, where we can come to connect with that truth and have

this embodied, spiritual experience embolden us and transform us for the work we've each been given to do..

Studying scripture, knowing the traditions of our faith, gathering for all this each week is, for sure, a good thing. But we risk falling into the same trap as the chief priests and the scribes of the temple if we stop there, if we see only that. We do all this not for its own sake, but to transform the world, as we ourselves are transformed by God.

Scripture, ritual, worship – this is the container for our wild and powerful spiritual reality, our spirituality, that's within each and every one of us and that Jesus is calling into life. It's the wild and powerful, wildly powerful, spiritual reality within each of us that Jesus knows can give us the strength and the conviction to follow him even and especially when it's dangerous, because if we choose to stick with him in an unjust world that doesn't want to be changed, it will be dangerous, for sure.

And, Jesus is teaching us that true power in this world is allowing God to speak and act through us, it's about the mysterious yet utterly essential role of spirituality in the bringing about of God's kingdom. That's why the church exists, why we do what all this.

And so church, remembering always its primary purpose, is the narrow gate of spiritual discovery, of spiritual practice and embodied encounter with God that opens us up into the massive, life-giving landscape of true freedom – where there's unquestioned hope for a renewed Creation, and where there's courage a-plenty to participate in bringing it all about. This is what church can be, this is what this place, this parish can be ... may it be so.