

And he said, ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them.’ This is the heart of our gospel reading today. For those of us who live a comfortable middle class existence, it can be easy to dismiss our whole Gospel reading with its predictions of persecutions, earthquakes, and famines. How could those apply to our lives? For those of us who live comfortable lives in nominal Christian majority countries, we do not know what it is to be persecuted for our faith. And if we live a comfortable middle-class existence, we likely have never really been hungry, so we cannot even begin to imagine what it is like to go for a long period of time without enough to eat. Depending on where we live, an earthquake might be a real possibility, but we likely live in a well designed house and operate in a community with an early warning system. So “earthquake” does not mean the same thing for us that it did for our ancestors.

It seems designed for the early Christians for whom the end of the world and the return of Christ seemed imminent. Those who did not have scientific or economic explanations for famines or earthquakes. Those who lived in a world where choosing to follow Jesus and acknowledge him as the Messiah, as the Son of God, was to take your life in your hands — quite literally. For thousands in the early years of the church, being a Christian meant persecution and frequently death. How could this Gospel text about the end times and the likelihood of persecution be relevant to us in the First World of the twenty-first century?

Here I return to Jesus’ command: ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them. Beware that you are not led astray. This is a message to which we twenty-first-century Christians can relate. While we may not face the same immediate life and death situations as so many of our forebears in the faith did and other parts of the world still do, we do face considerable temptations. We are, in fact, in great danger of being led astray. We only have to look around us, we know it is true.

The temptations in our world are wide and mighty. Many of us may be confronted by those who demean our faith and point out all that is wrong with institutional Christianity. They point to the scandals whilst conveniently ignoring the good the church does locally. They tell us we are behind the times and need to get with it- anything goes as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone. How retail shopping therapy has crept into our church affiliation. There are even churches who are so focussed on ‘works’ that faith comes a poor second. They often seem content and comfortable in their world view and can tempt us to think our lives would be easier if we just gave up on this whole following Jesus thing.

Every day we are bombarded by advertisements that tell us that if only we drank this coffee or drove this car or banked at this bank our lives would be the picture of fulfilment. We are surrounded by clever and creative enticements to buy more, to buy into the idea that material goods can give our lives meaning and make us feel fulfilled. And it is all too tempting to give in to our own selfish desires. When we are wronged, it is tempting to give into a desire for revenge or vengeance. When we are angry, it is tempting to lash out in anger and to hurt those we love. It is tempting to give in to our own laziness — to stay in bed instead of going to church, to prioritise God’s communal worship down the list under Bunnings, to give less to those in need, to resolve to be a more active member of our community, and the like, next year when we are not so busy, or when it is more convenient for us.

That is not who Jesus asks us to be. That is not the life he calls us to. He does not call us to laziness, material gluttony, or to a smug faith that cherry picks the simple and fun parts. No, Jesus calls us to be his followers, to be Christians. Jesus calls us to engage deeply with our faith and to be committed. We are called to be committed to living lives of faithful discipleship. This does not mean that our lives will be easy. There have been and no doubt will be, times when we want to give in to temptation. When we want to seek immediate gratification or the path that seems easier, but we would be wrong to do so.

This is not just a matter of blindly following a leader because he asked us to follow. The path of being a Christian may be challenging at times, and it may not always seem like the easy road, but it is a path worth following. I know what you may be thinking — not this “your reward is in heaven” stuff again. The church has tried that before and it didn’t go well. Well, don’t worry, I am not implying that we should spend our earthly lives suffering so we can seek a reward in heaven. I firmly believe there are rewards for our faith lives right here and now.

Being a follower of Jesus satisfies a hunger and a desire in my soul — a desire for meaning and acceptance. Being a follower of Jesus means that I am not alone in this. Even on the bad days when I feel unworthy or as though I am carrying the weight of the world, I am not alone. God is with me and even when I feel uncertain about the future or my place in it, I know that it is not all about me. I can trust that I am a part of something much bigger than me. I can trust that in some small way, I do matter. I am a beloved child of God, and in some way my being present — each of us being present on this earth matters. We are a part of something big. We are a part of building the kingdom of God, a part of making the world a better place.

While the personal, internal spiritual reward of following Jesus is significant, I believe it also matters because following Jesus inspires us to be our best and to do our best in the world. Following Jesus inspires us to be better people, to pay attention to the needs of those around us, to do our part to make this broken, sinful world a bit more like the kingdom of God.

May we commit ourselves to following Jesus more deeply. May we commit ourselves to resisting the myriad of temptations that distract us from his way. May we commit ourselves to sharing the good news and doing our part to build up the kingdom.

I shall leave you with the thought and prayer which is in our pew sheet week by week authored by Richard of Chichester over 800 years ago:

Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given us, for all the pains and insults you have borne for us. Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may we know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen

Fr Robert Newton