

TRINITY NEWS

WEEK 26.
June 25, 2023
Proper 7

Some thoughts on Matthew 10:16

“Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves...”

A rather odd bit of advice from our Lord here, don't you think? Two images that don't seem to belong together at all – serpents and doves; it's certainly a jarring contrast. I mean, “innocent doves,” yes – that sounds like Jesus, but “wise snakes?” Hardly.

So let's take a closer look at it – first at the words used here themselves, and then of the context in which this passage occurs.

The word here for 'wise' to start with, 'phronimos' is not the word that is usually used for wisdom in most other instances in Scripture: 'sophia.' And it has different connotations, for instance, in Genesis 3, where the serpent that tempts Eve is called the most 'phronimos' animal in the garden.

In that context, the translation is more on the lines of 'clever' or 'shrewd' or 'cunning,' i.e. not so positive a meaning as 'wise,' but not necessarily a wholly negative one either. If you think about it, snakes do know how to lie low and stay out of sight, avoid confrontation and slither around without making much noise at all – all very admirable survival traits for an animal who has a lot of bigger and stronger enemies in the savage world of a jungle or forest, where most animals are trying to eat other animals and at the same time, avoid being eaten themselves.

And when you look at the context of this verse, this idea of 'clever' or 'shrewd' or even, shall we say, 'street-wise' makes a lot of sense. Jesus is sending his apostles out into a wild and violent world to preach a gospel which challenges that world, that calls for peace, rather than war, love rather

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than hate, reconciliation rather than violence, and the very principles of domination and oppression on which the Earthly Powers are based, by which their authority over us is maintained. They are to celebrate the meek rather than the mighty, the poor over the rich, the humble over the proud. And they are going to face fierce, fierce resistance, they are going to need every bit of 'street-smarts' they can muster if they are going to get by or even survive!

And the same goes for us, if we are to be true followers of our Lord, and preach the same gospel he did, in a world no less violent, no less oppressive, no less dangerous than the one that the disciples were venturing into.

So let us try to keep our Lord's advice in mind, and try to be as shrewd and as clever as that serpent, all the time preserving the innocence, the simplicity of doves.

SAINTS OF THE WEEK:

Irenæus, Bishop of Lyons, 28 June. Irenæus was probably a native of Smyrna, born in about 130. As a boy, he had heard Polycarp preach, who had in turn been a disciple of the apostle John. Irenæus is thus one of the important connections between the apostolic Church and the second century. He studied at Rome, and later became a priest at Lyons in Gaul, succeeding as bishop upon the martyrdom of his predecessor in 177. He contended against the mythological, unhistorical beliefs of the Gnostics, giving positive value to the full humanity of the incarnate Christ, and affirmed the public teaching rôle of the episcopate to combat false doctrine. He is honoured as the first great Catholic theologian, one who drew upon the emerging traditions of East and West. Irenæus is believed to have been martyred in about the year 200.

Peter and Paul, Apostles, 29 June. Peter has often been called the 'Prince of the Apostles' because of the words of Jesus re-naming him, from Simon to Cephas. This was the Aramaic form of the Greek word Peter, which means 'rock'. Jesus said that on this rock he would build his Church. But both Peter and Paul came to be seen as having different rôles to play within the leadership of the Church: Peter in witnessing to the Lordship of Christ and Paul in developing an understanding of its meaning for Christ's followers. Peter and Paul have been remembered jointly on this day since the very early days of the Church, it being regarded as the anniversary of their martyrdom in Rome in about the year 64.