

WEEK 2: TUESDAY

Let's stand on the edge of the crowd and listen as Jesus gives his twelve disciples these next instructions. Some of the Twelve are looking decidedly uncomfortable, but there's nothing they can do about it. Jesus has called them and they're going to have to get on with it.

These words are uncomfortable. Jesus is telling them it's going to be tough. Not just tough in the sense of hard work with no pay and an uncertain future. Tough in the sense that people are not going to like the message. In particular, in this passage, it's clear that word is going to get back to the officials, whether in the Jewish communities or the wider world. And those officials may well take action.

You might have thought that the news that God was becoming king would be something his ancient people, the Jews, were eager to hear. In a sense, you'd be right. But several of them, particularly those in power like the Sadducees, and those who supported King Herod, didn't really want God to be king, or not just now. They were doing all right out of their own position, thank you very much, and didn't relish the idea of being taken down a peg or two. Especially by a bunch of wandering Galileans with news of a strange would-be king who was doing all sorts of things that no respectable king would ever get up to.

What about non-Jewish rulers? Obviously, news that the God of Israel was becoming king would be a threat to them. There had been revolutionary movements before, shouting 'no king but God' and meaning 'no, we don't want to pay Caesar's taxes!' Jesus can foresee that it's going to be as bad, if not worse, as it was then. Families will be divided. Persecution and even assassination may follow.

So what do you think, hearing all this and seeing the reaction? It may all seem quite unrealistic in today's comfortable western world. But the demands of the kingdom are no less today than they were then. As we find ourselves drawn in from the edge of the crowd, Jesus turns to us. What is he going to say? Are we prepared, in our own day, to follow his way even if people sneer, or threaten, or accuse us?

Jesus knew it was urgent. 'You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes,' he said (verse 23). This is very puzzling. It looks as though Jesus is talking about 'the Son of Man' as someone other than himself. He also seems to be saying that this cataclysmic event ('the coming of the Son of Man') will occur not just in their life-time but within a year or two at most. What's more, we might assume that Matthew wouldn't have reported Jesus as saying something like this unless he thought it was true. So what is it about?

The answer, as we shall see more fully in due course, is that this is heavily coded political language. Jesus is alluding to the picture we find in Daniel 7, a very popular passage at the time. It was widely read as a revolutionary text, speaking of the 'coming' or vindication of 'one like a Son of Man' — this figure 'coming' not to earth, but to God, to receive power and glory. At the moment, all the bystanders would hear would be a reference to 'the great event God has promised, through which his people will be vindicated'. Jesus would later show them there was more to it again than that. But for the moment they — and we, listening in — need to know that God's purpose is going ahead and that we, caught up to our surprise within it, need to act urgently to play our part in sharing the good news of his kingdom.

TODAY

Give us courage, good Lord, to follow you and to bear whatever suffering or insults may come as a result.