

MATTHEW 10:26-42
THE ABSOLUTE CENTRE!

Tatiana Goricheva is a Russian Orthodox Christian. In 1980 she was expelled from the USSR and came to the West. She has now returned home, but she wrote a little book about her experience of the KGB and exile and then coming to Europe. The book is called *Talking about God is dangerous* and hearing that the story comes from the Communist Soviet Union, you would think, as I did, that the title reflects her sense of persecution and how dangerous it was to be a Christian in that place at that time. In fact, the title is about something else; it is about her experience of Christianity in the West: "I saw my first religious broadcast ever on TV... what this man said on the screen was likely to drive more people out of the church than the clumsy chatter of our paid atheists... He was a boring bad actor (actually he was a preacher!) with mechanical and studied gestures. He was faceless. For the first time I understood how dangerous it is to talk about God. Each word must be a sacrifice – filled to the brim with authenticity."

For Christians in Pakistan, life is dangerous and difficult. Even going to Church for a service of worship can be a dangerous thing to do, as a public statement of loyalty to Jesus in face of people who openly and violently object to Christianity. There are stories of people whose hear the gospel and come to believe; they become followers of Jesus and then have to make a choice. By becoming followers of Jesus they put their life on line, quite literally: they have to choose between Jesus or family, because their family will at very least throw them out or even kill them for their new faith, for what they see as betrayal. What is it about the gospel that persuades people to face that choice and make it and choose Jesus?

Values: this is all about values. Everyone's life is shaped by a set of values of some kind and there is wide spectrum of values by which people live. It is not a question we ask all of the time, but there are times when we're brought face to face with our values and whether these values stack up or not. Usually this happens when we're presented with a choice: which way to behave? Which activity to support? Which way to spend our money? The choices we make reflect the sense of values that we hold. For Christians, our values should be shaped by Jesus; we call Jesus 'Lord' and our values and lifestyle and the way we behave should reflect that. How does Jesus shape our values? How does the gospel shape our values? For Tatiana Goricheva, she saw a Western culture, Christian in name, but empty of authentic Christian living, a Christianity that talked about values, but didn't live it out! Or do we soft pedal this question, or today's reading, to make church more acceptable to 21st century culture, more accommodating to people? How is it that Churches with a strong sense of values, with a strong sense of the kingship of Jesus, are growing, are drawing people?

Matthew 10 opens up for us a number of hard sayings of Jesus; the theme of this passage is "Jesus at the centre" and how we live with a set of values that reflect the fact that Jesus is the absolute centre of life. Before we start thinking we've got that already, we need to listen very carefully to what Jesus says. These are not hard sayings in the sense that we're not sure what Jesus is saying; these are hard sayings in sense that they challenge the way we think. Mark Twain was reputed as saying: "it is not the bits of the Bible that I don't understand that bother me, but the bits I do understand." I sympathise with that view today! How do we put Jesus at the absolute centre of our lives; we confess Jesus as Lord and that should translate to Him being the centre, the

master of all that we are, all that we think, of our sense of values. But it is so easy to let something else be the absolute centre of life, to let something else take His place.

There is a situation at work or with a neighbour: a conversation arises about values and you're put on the spot; they know that you're a Christian and so the question arises about your Christian attitudes or what the Christian believes. They expect you to answer. You have a choice to make. You don't want to embarrass yourself, or show yourself up; you're afraid of the reaction to your answer, that others will make fun of you or challenge what you say. So you make your excuses very quickly and leave and as you leave a sense of relief fills you, that you've escaped a dangerous situation. You want to be safe and comfortable and you achieve that. But at what cost is your safety and comfort? *"Do not..." (10:26,28)* There are two senses of fear in these words: first of all, being afraid, in this case afraid of people in the way that I've just described, terrified of what other people will think. Then secondly there is the "fear of God": the "fear of God" in the Bible is never terror, but reverence, awe, ready to honour God for the great God that He is. Is the cost of our ease and comfort is a missed opportunity for the gospel and a sense of disloyalty to God? Is reverence for God more important than personal ease and comfort?

Families: "our nearest and dearest". For so many people, there are two things that drive them today: work and families. Many people spend most of their time and energy in these two places. For others, family life is source of anguish and agony, with relationships falling apart. "Our nearest and dearest" Or are they? *"Do not..." (10:34ff)* Don't misunderstand: Jesus is talking here about the consequences of His ministry rather than its intention, the effect of His ministry rather than its purpose. Mark tells us of the start of Jesus' ministry; *"Then Jesus..." (Mark 3:20f)* Jesus knows what this sword, this division is like; He has tasted it first hand. So what is this all about? Other Bible places tell us that family is really important; God set us in families; we are to provide for our families, "our nearest and dearest". Jesus says that the kingdom of God is to be nearer and dearer still! Family is not the absolute centre of the Christian's life; Jesus is; the kingdom of God is the centre and shapes the way we do family life! Jesus knows this is controversial so He puts it in the most arresting language He can find. The gospel will divide; some will accept Jesus as Lord, others will not; families are divided over the most important value in the universe. Jesus at the centre? Or is that too hard?

The cost of being a disciple: *"anyone who..." (10:38f)* The cross was a familiar sight in first-century Palestine; the Romans had crucified 2000 people in Galilee because of a revolt. People knew what it meant to bear a cross; it would take on new meaning for the disciples when Jesus had to do the same! This is all about loyalties – where do our loyalties lie? When push comes to shove, our loyalties lie to ourselves, to our natural inclinations and interests; we do what pleases ourselves. The picture of cross-bearing challenges that whole attitude: cross-bearing is not about having some dreadful thing to put up with, a person that we can't stand; that's not the cross-bearing that Jesus means. Cross-bearing in Jesus' mind is about giving up that self-driven loyalty, is about dying to self and our natural interests and inclinations and putting Jesus first; our final and absolute loyalty is to Jesus. "No Christian can ever again do what he likes; he must do what Christ likes." (Barclay) Is there something worth dying for? That is an academic question for us, but is a real question for Christians across the world. Values – what matters to us more than anything else?

What does Jesus value? We get some insight here by the wonderful little picture of sparrows: *"Are not..." (10:29f)* Sparrows and other small birds were sold in the market-

place; they were the cheapest of birds and the cheapest of food; something completely insignificant in the whole scheme of things as far as the world is concerned, two of them for sale for a sixteenth of a denarius. Yet, God knows every move they make; when they jump to the ground, when they fly, everything. He knows and He cares. This is a picture of the Father valuing us; “*don’t...*” (10:31) It is not hard to apply this today: some people in Scotland, those who make the most noise, would suggest that Christians are totally unimportant, that faith is to be rubbished in our modern, secular nation; that most right-thinking Scots have moved on from Christian faith, and it is a historical relic to be consigned to bin. We hear that and consider that we are unloved, no-one really values us for who and what we are in our society; we fear for the future of our faith and the Church. Our values are being ridiculed and mocked. There are other ways in which our sense of being valued is undermined. Jesus reminds us that we are loved and cared for by our Father; He knows everything about us and cares for us. Our Christian values are a response to the values that Jesus shows and by which Jesus lives. Our cross-bearing - our response to One who bore a cross for us; Jesus as King – our response to One who served God and served us; Jesus at the centre of our lives – our response to One whose greatest desire was to do the will of God and save the world. Here are Jesus’ values: He loves God, He loves us. Here’s Paul’s version: “*For in...*” (Galatians 5:6)

Values: here are two ways of expressing our values. Life can be seen in a whole lot of segments that are vaguely connected: there is the work segment; the relationships, including family, segment; an emotional segment; a recreation segment; a physical segment; a spiritual segment recognising that we are made for relationship with God; we could also have a religion segment that is about the practice of our faith. That last segment is one amongst many that can be somehow disconnected from the rest; it is part of life for a time in the week, but for the rest of the time is then not connected to anything else. Here’s another view: the same segments are there, but at the heart of all of them is a circle representing Jesus; Jesus is the absolute centre of life; His Kingship shapes all of these other segments, including the religion and spiritual; His kingship affects the way we go to work, affects our relationships, including attitude to family, affects the way we spend our leisure time and what we do with money. The Kingdom of God is the nearest and dearest of all; “there is no matter of greater moment than the kingdom of God.” (Bruce)

“God’s call has many aspects. We are called as people to faith, as friends to relationships, as co-workers to churches, as parents to families, as praying people to communities, as partners to marriages, as leaders to ministries and as servants to all. These things cross our neat boundaries of ‘church’ and ‘real life’...” (Growing Leaders) Nothing there contradicts anything Jesus said, but makes it plain. As Christian disciples, Jesus is to be the absolute centre of everything; Jesus is to shape our values in every conceivable way. Jesus is to shape our family values; Jesus is to shape our workplace values; Jesus is to shape our leisure-time values; Jesus is to shape marriage values; Jesus is to shape our church values; Jesus is to shape our leadership and ministry values; Jesus is to shape the way we think about ourselves. He loves and cares for us more deeply than we will ever know; He values us so much that He willingly sacrificed Himself for our benefit. Our values are a response to that; our values need to reflect Jesus as King; they need to be cross-shaped; we need to have Jesus at the absolute centre. Are we people with Jesus at the centre? Is that how we will be?