

Hymn:

Reading: Mark 13.9-13

Prayers:

Imagine perhaps fifteen people gathered together
about forty years after the death of Jesus.
They have come together early in the morning,
perhaps secretly because of fear of being attacked
when they are all together in one place.
A few months ago there were more of them
but several have now ceased to gather for worship
because of what has been happening to their fellow Christians:

- two have been given 39 lashes in the synagogue
as allowed in the Book of Deuteronomy
because they have been preaching that Jesus is the Messiah.
- another is now in prison
having been brought before the Roman authorities
for having caused an uproar in the market place
when they declared that Jesus not the Emperor
was the true Son of God.

It's not easy for them either:

- Many of them face intense opposition
from members of their own families.
There are stresses within marriages
because of what they have come to believe,
what they insist on doing
and on what they will not do.
- Some find their business is suffering
because people will not buy from them
and others find it hard to get employment.
- Day by day, they live with mockery
by those who call them "stupid"
and who despise them for worshipping a God
who is seen in a crucified Galilean!

So they gather together
and on this day a new scroll is produce
written for them by someone who knows their situation.
The passage we have just heard is read
and they immediately recognise their own situation.
They hear of persecution by Roman and Jewish authorities,
by family and friends.

But they also hear Jesus saying three things:

First, "Be on guard"

Jesus warns his disciples that they must be prepared

to share in his own sufferings.
There is no promise of an easy life
but a call to live faithfully in the midst
of whatever the world may throw at them.

In Britain today few Christians face physical suffering
or are hauled before the courts because of what they believe.
Yet, the conscientious objectors to the First World War,
most of them Christians and many of them Methodists,
were imprisoned in often grim circumstances
and universally reviled
because of what they believed it was morally wrong to fight.
We may note that this was also one of the accusations
against the first Christians:
their refusal to serve in Roman army!

Today, as in Studdart Kennedy's poem
it may be as hard to cope with the indifference of society
to the good news of the Gospel
as to face active opposition.
We may be tempted to say, "What the blazers!" and give up!

Secondly, "First, the good news must be proclaimed to all nations."

There was a strand of thought in the early church
which thought that within their own lifetime
God will bring this age to an end.
Jesus says, there is much of history still to come
before God brings life in this world to its final fullstop.
They need to be prepared for a long slog!

It's easy to lose heart whether through active persecution
or through world's indifference.
But if it is true that the ultimate reality
is a God who is love,
whose love for all people has the power
to transform all human life and relationships,
then whether in times of ease or in a worldwide financial crisis
this is good news both to us and to the world!

Thirdly, "The one who holds out to the end will be saved."

"Being saved" – is one of the ways the Bible expresses
both the life we live with God now
and that ultimate life which we will live in his presence.
For now, we live with him in the hope of what will be.
Beyond this life we shall see him face to face!
So, in the present, through steadfast faith and love
we prepare ourselves for that day! **Amen.**