

Sermon: St Catherine's Patronal Festival  
*Matthew: 10.28-33; Revelation: 21.5-7*

First of all, let me say that it is a privilege and great joy to be asked by Kara, your chaplain to preach at your patronal festival. It is many years since I last preached here in St. Catherine's. In the intervening years the wheel of time has turned in the life of this congregation, bringing many changes and developments, as it has in my life. After saying a heavy-hearted farewell in St. Thomas à Becket in Hamburg last Sunday, I have re-located back to our home in Suessen from which base I will be carrying out my new duties in the Church of England Diocese in Europe as Archdeacon of Germany and the North and Archdeacon of the East. St. Catherine's therefore has again become my home congregation. All this while, Julie my wife, whilst assisting as priest in Hamburg, has sustained her support to St. Catherine's and kept the home fires burning. We therefore both look forward to this renewed engagement with you all.

Today we remember the patron saint Catherine whose name this church bears because of the other Catherine, Catherine Masson who left a legacy for a church to be built in the name of St. Catherine of Alexandria.

St. Catherine's symbol, as you well know, is the wheel. We also know what a revolution in the development of human civilisation the discovery of the wheel represents. From that time mobility and transport took an enormous leap forward. People and places were brought closer, goods could travel faster and in greater quantity from place to place. I understand that here in St. Catherine's the wheel has sometimes been used to say farewell to those leaving, symbolising that they are moving away into a new phase of their life, but also that we stay connected and that they are always welcome if they visit or move back. So, the wheel symbolises progress, positive change and continuity.

But we also know that St. Catherine has been associated with the wheel because for her it became the instrument of torture by the ruling powers. It is a reminder that, tragically, we human beings have the propensity to turn what is good into its reverse, to use what takes us forward and brings us together into instruments that divide and destroy. Wheels were soon and with destructive effect put on chariots and armed vehicles of war, for

instance; even irresponsible joy rides can turn fast cars into weapons that kill innocent people as a recent case before the courts here in Stuttgart testifies.

The so-called Catherine Wheel goes back to the legend that has survived of Catherine, the daughter of Constus, who was the governor of Alexandrian Egypt during the reign of the Roman Emperor Maximian in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Alexandria, where Catherine lived, was the centre of Hellenistic knowledge and culture. She is said to have possessed rare beauty and intellect and received an excellent education, studying the works of the greatest philosophers and teachers of the ancient times. Young men from the worthiest families of the empire sought her hand, but she was not interested in any of them. Her mother was a secret Christian and had her instructed in the faith by her spiritual guide, a saintly man living in a cave outside the city. Catherine was baptised by this monk. She then had a vision of the Lord looking tenderly at her and giving her a ring, a token of her betrothal to the Heavenly Bridegroom.

Catherine boldly confessed her faith in the one true God. She held her own in a dispute against fifty reputed philosophers who were to convince her of the errors of Christianity and she openly opposed the emperor for persecuting Christians. Her torture was to be broken on the wheel, yet she steadfastly refused to renounce the Christian faith and offer sacrifice to the gods. The wheel broke down, causing many of the soldiers and bystanders to confess their faith in Christ. Catherine refused a reprieve offered by the emperor on condition that she renounce her faith and laid her head on the block along with the other converts.

Friends, today's Gospel speaks into this context of the costliness of remaining faithful. It does not deny the price that often has to be paid, but it affirms its worth. It is in this faith that Catherine and the host of martyrs and saints persevered. It touches upon something at the heart of our Christian faith, namely the uncompromised loyalty to Christ as being the overriding loyalty in our lives. Our loyalty in ultimate terms is not to countries, to governments, to sovereigns or even to individuals, but as Christians it is to Christ. St Catherine stands as a role model for resistance to powerful and unscrupulous rulers. Even in recent times

some rulers expect the Church and its believers to be compliant and to bless their policies however questionable they may be. In this country, we know too well how dictatorial and fascist rule sacrificed its opponents like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But even in our day and age the good political instrument of democratic rule is being corrupted; facts are converted into fake and vice versa. Those who comply with these methods are honoured and those that resist them are isolated and maligned. And we have to admit that the Church of Christ itself is not safe-guarded from such corrosive and divisive forces. Today we are called to take a stand.

But, friends, our Gospel gives us reason to be encouraged, for it is not a Gospel of doom but of comfort: *‘Do not fear those that kill the body but cannot kill the soul... Even the hairs on your head are all counted. So, do not be afraid...’* And it gives us the rule by which to live our lives: *‘So have no fear...; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered....What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light...’*

Dear friends, St Augustine of Hippo once said: “It is the *cause* and not the *suffering* that makes the martyr”. The cause that unites us and for which we must stand as a Christian community is the Gospel of Christ, his message of unqualified love, acceptance, welcome, tolerance, justice and peace. Our calling is always to look to Christ and to stand up for his message and his truth in our world of today. We pray that we are not asked to make the ultimate sacrifice. But the message is ours to claim that our faithfulness will earn its reward when we are united around the throne of God - the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End of all things - as his children. Amen.