

Jeremiah 20:7-13  
Psalm 69:8-11, 18-20  
Romans 6:1b-11  
MATTHEW 10:24-397

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Matthew 10:34 (NRSV)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are several approaches that we can take this sentence. We can take this sentence literally; take the sword, or gun, and go forth to proclaim the gospel and convert the heathen to the one true religion. Many religions have done this, including Christianity. But is this what Jesus was calling us to do? Even if such an effort was effective, would we have we been faithful to Jesus and the Kingdom of God? In this sentence, Jesus may have said that he had come to bring a sword, but in the Garden of Gethsemane, when one of the disciples did draw a sword to defend him, Jesus told him to put it away. Before the High Priest and Pilate, he even refused to verbally defend himself or attack those who would judge and kill him. On the cross, he asked God to forgive those who had rejected him and crucified him by the power of the sword.

So what was the sword that Jesus said that he had come to bring?

And what about that peace that Jesus says he did not come to bring? We keep hearing about Jesus as the peacemaker or other such references. Are they wrong? It just depends on what you mean by peace, and how you achieve it. Jesus lived during the longest and most wide spread period of peace in human history—the Pax Romana. With the power of its great, disciplined and brutal armies, Rome had conquered the entire Mediterranean world and beyond. By Jesus’ time, major wars were nearly unheard of, good paved roads connected all parts of the empire and travel was relatively easy and safe. Commerce flourished, and wealth was created. This state of affairs lasted for nearly five centuries. What more could one ask for?

Many of the leaders of the Jewish faith made sure that things were peaceful in Jerusalem by complying with the wishes of the Roman authorities. Justice, God’s peace, healing and the teachings of the law and prophets were not really all that important. The really important things were to keep the Romans happy and the leaders’ way of life secure.

Well, on a Friday at the beginning of Passover about two thousand years ago just outside of Jerusalem, Rome and the Jewish leaders demonstrated how they got and kept that peace.

So what do we make of these passages? How do we interpret them? I have tried above to show that there are problems with taking a sentence or passage out of its context and trying to interpret it in a literal. More often than not we end up giving it our own meaning without any reference to what it may have meant to the one who spoke it or wrote it or to those who originally heard it. When we do this, we turn it into a sterile, rigid word that cannot give life.

Over the past two centuries scholars have shown that all of the gospels that are in the New Testament were written at least two generations after the death and resurrection of Jesus. All were written out of the life and experiences of particular communities. All made extensive use of oral traditions about the life and ministry of Jesus and collections of Jesus’ sayings.

During those first years, everyone was so busy living the gospel and witnessing to the life and teachings of Jesus that writing everything down in a document or biography did not seem important. What was important was spreading the good news and living for the kingdom. Nothing could stop those who had been touched by Jesus from that most important task. Nothing could quench the fire that burned within them to tell the world what God had done for them.

It was not until later when most, if not all, of those who had known and heard Jesus had passed on and there was an urgent need to write down the traditions that the gospel traditions were transformed into the written Gospels that we now have. When they were written down, they reflected the communities from which they came and for whom they were written. Often, they seem to have been written during periods of crisis and early persecution.

Today's Gospel is made up of a collection of sayings. Most students of the New Testament doubt that Jesus spoke this passage all at once, but rather a number of his sayings were brought together. Matthew places them in the context of Jesus teaching about a mission on which he is sending his disciples. Mark had placed most of them in a different setting. By the time this Gospel was written, the community of The Way was experiencing rejection and persecution. Most contemporary Jews considered their claims about Jesus to be heretical. Those who held to those claims were being thrown out of their synagogues and families. Members of the community also refused to join in the developing movement to violently overthrow Roman rule and were considered traitors to Israel by many of their contemporaries. The Romans for their part were coming to mistrust and hate them for a variety of reasons. The most prominent of these was their refusal to burn incense to the Emperor, the symbol of the supremacy of the Empire.

As Abba Anthony, one the great desert fathers said: "The time is coming when people will be insane, and when they see someone who is not insane, they will attack that person saying: You are insane because you are not like us." (Yushi Nomura, *Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers*. p. 15.)

Yes, they experienced persecution and even martyrdom. But it did not end there. Studies have estimated that in the last century, more Christians suffered persecution and martyrdom for their faith than in all of the previous centuries combined. The world is still hostile to the message of Christ. What bothers me about this latter fact is that often other Christians abandoned those who were being persecuted or even made their persecution even worse by their actions. And we are still doing it.

But what disturbed me most as I thought about this passage is not that Christians are still being persecuted but how often Christians have been the ones who have been the persecutors and killers of others in the name of Christ and have used scripture to justify it. Abba Anthony's words have become true. Unfortunately they are often true about Christians.

So how do we have a clue as to whether what we are doing is what Jesus called us to? How do we interpret Scripture in such a way that it leads us to God through Christ and not to evil?

In this short sermon, I cannot even begin to touch all of the issues that this would take, and I am not sure that we can ever be absolutely sure. I do think that there are thoughts both from Jesus and contemporaries that can guide us and help us to find our way.

Jesus said that a disciple is not above the teacher and that if they had called the master of the house of Beelzebul, will they not malign those of his household? His reference here is to the things that the defenders of orthodoxy said about him when he healed a man on the Sabbath and when he cast out a demon from a blind and mute person. Throughout his ministry Jesus healed. He healed physically. He healed the mentally and emotionally broken. He healed those who had been told that they were unfit for God, community or religion and brought them back into community and communion with God. If our ministry and life is about healing and making whole all of God's creation, then we can be sure that we are following Jesus.

Jesus also makes it very clear that if we are faithful, sooner or later we will pay a price. It probably will not be martyrdom, but there will be a price. Daniel Berrigan put it this way: Those who are willing to sacrifice nothing or very little, offer nothing or very little to history. It must also be said that they offer little or nothing to their own soul." (*Nor Bars to Manhood* p. 115) The sword that Jesus brought was his own life and ministry. In all that he did and taught, he challenged those around him

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a witness for Christ, a messenger of the Kingdom. Richard John Neuhaus in *Freedom for Ministry* said that the wind in sails of Dr. King's prophetic witness was his conviction those "whom you would change, you must first love." Dr. King was a witness and a sword that divided, yet his ministry was marked by love. Mr. Neuhaus went on to write "That means that we must see more in other people than they see in themselves if we are to help them in becoming what they are." If our encounter with Scripture brings us to a place where we feel for others is judgment and superiority rather than love, then we know that we are on dangerous ground.

I want to suggest humility as critical to our spirituality, ministry and approach to Scripture. Malcolm Muggeridge once said: "Humility is not just the most important virtue but the condition of all virtue." Humility gives us openness to God and to others. It gives us the possibility of learning from others and from experience. Humility keeps us from arrogance and a sense of superiority that gives to treat others in ways that are destructive and belittling. Humility gives us the possibility of encountering Christ and all that God gives and opens to us.

This passage from Matthew came from the life and teachings of Jesus. It also came out of and witnessed to the community of those who followed him. There is a dynamic here that I think we must also consider. So often we treat Scripture as if it is something rigid, unyielding and of the past. God has spoken to his chosen in the past. It is our duty to figure out what it all means. I would like to suggest that we need another approach.

Amen.

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