

Mt. 10.24-39; Jer. 20.7-13; Romans 6.1b-11

Trinity 2, Sunday 25th June 2017: St. Andrew's, Totteridge.

Enable us, our Father, to respond to the grace of your Word with humility of heart and in the Holy Spirit of love; that our lives may be conformed more and more to the image of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace amongst those whom he favours!” The voice of an angel from Luke's gospel soon after the birth of the baby Jesus (Lk.2:14). Set this alongside the reading we've just heard from Mt. 10:34: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” – and questions inevitably arise. How can we possibly take on board this idea that, far from being the Prince of Peace, Jesus is actually an agent of conflict?

And this is not just a contradiction between gospels, Luke also includes the “Do not think that I have come to bring peace...” saying as well, but he replaces the metaphorical word ‘sword’ with the non-metaphorical word, ‘division’, and both evangelists go on to cite Jesus' words, “For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law...” etc., (Mt.10:35; Lk.12:53). Is this an inconsistency in the New Testament message of peace?

Firstly, we should remember that the Bible is not an answer-book or a collection of proof-texts. To use the Bible for selective proof-texts is to turn divine enigma into man-made dogma. The Bible is not an answer-book it is a puzzle-book that, rather than closing debate, tries to ensure it is opened and provoked. It's why we so often hear Jesus debating the meaning of scripture in the gospels.

Having said that, I don't think Jesus was advocating conflict, though I dare say there have been, and still will be, interpreters of scripture who think that *was* what Jesus was doing. What he did teach his disciples was to offer no resistance or retaliation to aggression or abuse (Mt.5:39), and he did say ‘Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called children of God’ (Mt.5:9).

When he paid his last visit to Jerusalem, the message he brought was all about ‘the things that make for peace’ and he wept because the city refused his message and was bent on a course which was bound to lead to destruction (Lk.19:41-44). His followers proclaimed a ‘gospel of peace’ (Eph.6:15) and a ‘message of reconciliation’ (2Cor.5:19) because this was their experience.

Estranged individuals and groups found themselves reconciled through their shared devotion to Christ – just think of Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector, living together as two of the twelve apostles – the others must have thought of this as a miracle of grace. When Jesus spoke of tension and conflict within a family this may well have reflected his own personal experience. There are indications that members of his own family had little sympathy with his ministry and on one occasion they endeavoured to restrain him (Mk.3.21); St. John tells us, ‘...not even his brothers believed in him’ (Jn.7.5).

So what did Jesus mean when he said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” ? (10:34) I think he was warning, prophesying, that his coming would bring trouble *and* strife, that this would be the *effect* of his coming, but not the

purpose. His prediction did, of course, come true in the life of the early church, and has been underscored countless times across the ages ever since.

Christians of every tradition and persuasion have argued amongst themselves for millennia, especially within families or tribes where belief is not shared. St. Paul spoke to the people of Corinth of how the Christian partner in a mixed marriage should not resort to force or legal action to inflict their will on the other, because ‘[God has called us to peace.](#)’

And there is no limit in my view as to how far we can go on the journey of building peaceful community and goodwill amongst all humanity, especially in these times when aggrieved, damaged people seek to inflict their warped ideology onto us all. ‘[Terror is all around](#)’ says Jeremiah (20.10) – some things don’t ever change.

I’ve recently read of an Anglican priest, the Revd. Dave Tomlinson, and a neighbouring Imam, conducting a joint Muslim/Christian wedding in Holloway recently. The bride and groom each took their faith very seriously and wanted no compromise, with each tradition properly represented, and the day was apparently a magnificent convergence of religions, cultures and families.

Many people’s vision of religion was transformed by this celebration of a multi-faith marriage, the warm working partnership of a priest and Imam, the mingling of different traditions and the demonstration that God belongs to no one and to everyone.

Our Father in heaven is the ultimate loving power that brings and sustains all life; his Son was demonstrably the Prince of Peace whilst he was here, drawing on adherents of other faith traditions to illustrate his priorities and challenge our tendency to condescend or discredit.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can see the same Godly assertion of peace mirrored in the behaviour of the Imam who, despite the surge in London of anti-Muslim hate crime since the Westminster & London Bridge attacks, would not allow the Finsbury Park terrorist to be lynched for the wilful assault on his congregation.

As the Revd. Dave has said, attacks like this are not simply attacks on Muslims, any more than what happened in Manchester or Westminster was aimed solely at Christians. These are attacks on all of us who love life and who realise that the most basic thing which unites us is not religion or ethnicity, but simply our common God-given humanity.

Matthew 10.24-39

24 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

26 'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

32 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

34 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Jeremiah 20.7-13

⁷ O Lord, you have enticed me,
and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughing-stock all day long;
everyone mocks me.

⁸ For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!'
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.

⁹ If I say, 'I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name',
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

¹⁰ For I hear many whispering:
'Terror is all around!'
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!
All my close friends

are watching for me to stumble.
'Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him.'
¹¹ But **the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;**
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
and they will not prevail.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonour
will never be forgotten.
¹² O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

¹³ Sing to the Lord;
praise the Lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of evildoers.

Romans 6.1b-11 Dying and Rising with Christ

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! **How can we who died to sin go on living in it?** ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as

Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So **you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

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