

Not Peace, But A Sword

Please note that this article is also available as an audio file if you wish to hear it read instead of reading it yourself. The reading today is written in Matthew's Gospel chapter 10 verses 34 - 39

Introduction

You don't need me to tell you that Jesus is often referred to as teacher; indeed it was a common title for Him, often used by His followers. We read in the Gospels that Jesus "*taught in parables*" (Mk 4:2) and taught as "*one who had authority*" (Mk 1:22).

In fact, many of you reading this article probably first heard Jesus' teachings as youngsters, perhaps in Primary School or maybe Sunday School, where you were introduced to Bible stories such as the Good Samaritan, which teaches us the importance of being kind and compassionate to those around us; or the parable of the Prodigal Son, where we learn just how great the Father's love for us really is, and how He longs for people to turn back to Him.

These are just two examples of the kind of teaching we usually associate with Jesus: parables and stories, easy to remember and usually with a straight forward message that's relevant and applicable to our daily lives. But there are also many other aspects of Jesus' teaching recorded in the Gospels that aren't so straight-forward; teaching that is either difficult to understand, or easy to understand but difficult to accept or apply. And our reading this morning falls into this second category, as we heard in Matthew, where Jesus said:

*"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth.
I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn:
'a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
a man's enemies will be the members of his own household'."*

This saying of Jesus - much of which is a quote from the prophet Micah – is one which many people, including many Christians, find both perplexing and hard to understand. "Surely" they say, "isn't the Gospel of Christ, the Gospel of peace?" Indeed, even the Apostles understood the Gospel in this way. Paul actually calls it, "The Gospel of Peace" in his letter to the Ephesians (cf. Eph 6:15). So what then, did Jesus mean when He says He came, "not to bring peace, but a sword?"

Well of one thing we can be certain, Jesus is not advocating violence, because it's quite clear from the rest of Jesus' teaching that He expects His followers to be peaceful and peace-loving – yes, even

towards their enemies. *“Blessed are the peacemakers”* said Jesus, *“for they shall be called children of God”*. And He also said, *“those who take up the sword, will die by the sword.”* (Matt 26:52). God is a God of peace and reconciliation.

The Cost of Discipleship

Given this basic truth then, that still leaves us with the question, what did Jesus mean when He said He came, “not to bring peace, but a sword”? Well I believe that Jesus was referring to the cost of discipleship; the cost of being one of His followers. Jesus knew full well that not everyone would accept the Gospel and embrace Him as their Lord and Saviour. Even within the same family, there would be those who would accept Christ and those who would not. And in some instances where this happens, it will create conflict and division. Indeed, you may know of instances yourself where, within the same family, the Gospel has been the cause of some serious tension and division, where one member believes and others don’t.

So when Jesus said He had come to bring, not peace, but a sword, He meant that this would be the effect of His coming, not the purpose. And this is an important distinction. Jesus’ purpose was to bring salvation to mankind and lead people back to God; but the effect of the Gospel, in some cases, would be to create division in the form of opposition to both Jesus and the Gospel message and those who follow Him.

History has shown again and again that, when one or two members of a family or a particular social group, have committed themselves to Christ, it can provoke opposition from others members of that same family or group. In many cases it can be extremely difficult and dangerous for those converts to remain within that family unit. Sometimes, the opposition can be so intense that, if they do not renounce their faith, they will have to flee for their lives. In the final analysis, if we find ourselves in the situation of having to choose between Christ or our family, Jesus is saying clearly, we are to choose Him.

Death Threats

This has certainly been the case for many who come to faith in Christ in certain middle eastern countries, especially those where conversion to Christianity is punishable by death. And it’s not just the Middle East either. In 2014, a young Sudanese Muslim woman, Meriam Ibrahim, married a Christian man, and so converted to Christianity. But this is crime in Sudan, so she was arrested, imprisoned and sentenced to death.

This case provoked an international outcry, and she was eventually released on appeal. Meriam and her family then left Sudan for fear of her life, and fled to Rome. Although this is an extreme case, it is by no means isolated, many other similar cases fail to get publicity so we don’t hear about them, but

there have been many cases documented over the years, of converts to Christianity being threatened - even by members of their own family. For some people then, becoming a Christian can be the beginning, not of a peaceful and prosperous life, but of a time of real hardship and anguish.

Unbelieving Partners

Now, all this talk of death threats for converting to Christianity, is not part of our normal experience in this country. Even though Christianity is much more marginalised today than in the past, we still have a great deal of freedom here in the west, and we can be thankful for that.

But nevertheless, even in this country, it can still be difficult for some people who come to faith in Christ - for example, if someone becomes a Christian, but their partner doesn't. This is situation many find themselves in, and at times can certainly create problems and tensions.

The point here is, that becoming a follower of Jesus is not a trivial thing or a passing phase or fad; rather it's a life changing and life giving decision. It's not like joining a bowling club, or becoming a member of a local darts team, which if you get bored with it, you can just drop it and move on. Becoming a Christian is about committing yourself completely to the Lord of Heaven and Earth: it's about eternal life and death. If, as a result of becoming a Christian life starts to get difficult, Jesus isn't someone we can just drop and then move on - we cannot treat Him like that. So, if we have to decide between Jesus and someone else - anyone else, even members of our own family - we are to choose Jesus, because no decision you will ever make will be more important than the decision you make about Jesus Christ.

But making that decision, may create some real problems for you and lead you into some trying and difficult times. But Christ has promised that those who remain faithful to the end, those who stand firm and do not renounce their faith in the face of adversity, their eternal reward will be great indeed, and that is a promise He will keep. Amen.