

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”

These are, without doubt, some of the hardest words attributed to Jesus in the whole canon of Scripture. There’s no way around how difficult they are to hear and to understand, so I think we should just dive right in to trying to make some sense of them in the context of Jesus’ ministry and in our own lives.

Let’s start with the idea of setting parents against children and finding that one’s foes are members of one’s own household. Aren’t Christians supposed to be pro-family? Well, yes and no. The Church’s position for the last few centuries has been that family life is good and potentially sacred, and certainly every bit as capable of incubating holiness in individuals as is a life of celibacy and what is more commonly seen as a complete devotion to God, such as the priesthood or monasticism. Our Prayer Book has a beautiful prayer for families that includes these lines: “Knit together in constant affection those who, in

holy wedlock, have been made one flesh. Turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to the parents; and so enkindle fervent charity among us all, that we may evermore be kindly affectioned one to another” (BCP 828). Oddly, this would seem to almost directly contradict the words of Jesus from today’s Gospel. So what is going on here?

There are at least two things happening in this saying that are worth pondering. On the one hand, it’s clear from this Gospel reading and a few other passages that Jesus was not un-ambivalent about the family. Jesus repeatedly warns us that our primary loyalty must always be to God, even if that means risking everything that is dear to us. Think about sayings like, “Let the dead bury their dead,” and “Those who try to keep their life will lose it” and “Give up all that you have and follow me.” It is not just privileges and possessions that can get in the way of our relationship to God—sometimes it is relationships, including with our closest family members and loved ones. American Christianity has developed such an obsessive focus on the family and family values that we have tended to overlook or explain away these passages, but they

make sense when you think about the kind of undivided allegiance that Jesus both practiced and preached.

On the other hand, Jesus is not advocating that we intentionally create strife in our families or revel in dysfunction in our society. The divisions that sometimes arise when we put God first in our lives are the sad result of sin and brokenness: they are not the way God wants things to be. *Of course* a close family is a precious gift—and God *does* want us to love one another, to live in harmony, to feel gratitude and respect for the people he has placed in our lives. It's just that those relationships must never become an excuse for us keeping silent about what we believe or growing lazy in our devotion to God and the needs of the wider world. The gift of family, like every other gift, can become an idol that we place above God, as Jesus repeatedly tells us in some of his harder sayings.

Which brings us to the bit about bringing a sword rather than peace. I should probably say right off the bat that I think this is meant to be taken metaphorically—which should not lessen the impact or the seriousness of it. It's just that the rest of Jesus's life and sayings are so

radically non-violent that it makes no sense to think that Jesus is praising or even endorsing physical violence here. Which suggests, actually, that he's using such shocking language because he really wants us to pay attention, to understand something especially important here.

Jesus and his followers lived in a world where things seemed to be always on the verge of falling apart, where political factions and competition were threatening to tear apart the very fabric of society by the seams. We can relate to a world like that. It is the world we still live in today. Violence, division, and chaos, or the threat of chaos, are everywhere we turn. Just ten days ago a man shot at members of Congress who were out practicing for a baseball, apparently motivated by political extremism. Earlier this month in the city of St Louis there were 11 people killed in one week, including a 7-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy. Acts of terror in the Middle East and Europe grab headlines on an almost daily basis. And the growing number of shootings of unarmed black citizens by police officers continues to spark outrage, controversy, and even more division in our community and around the country. I could go on, but you get the point. These are only a

few examples of issues where we would seem to need the Prince of Peace now more than ever, not some sword-wielding zealot.

Well, as someone once succinctly put it, *there is peace and then there is peace*. Peace has to be more than the absence of conflict. In the Bible peace is **always always** linked with righteousness, with justice, with the sense that all of creation is flourishing. That is why the Roman Peace, the famed Pax Romana, was never really a peace at all—it was instead a kind of cruel stability, the status quo enforced by repression, threat, and sometimes even outright brutality. Jesus knew about such so-called peace, and he rejected it.

Jesus had no illusions about the cost of real peace. He understood that to help set people free from both external oppression and their own sinfulness would come at a price. It might mean that people who followed him would be rejected by their families. It might mean that following him could lead to conflicts within other aspects of society. This is still how it is today. It takes a lot of courage, or a lot of faith, to say things that people do not want to hear, to risk being seen as divisive rather than accepting of all beliefs and behaviors. It may sometimes feel

like you're doing more harm than good. I'm almost certain that it felt that way to the followers of Jesus when they stood beneath the Cross or fled from the scene, wondering how their beloved Messiah could have become such a lightning rod, such a sower of division. To quote Professor Lance Pape of Brite Divinity School: "Kingdom work, it turns out, is more controversial and subversive than conventional kindness. [...] The demands of the Prince of true peace may very well feel like a sword cutting through lesser loyalties and making quick work of our flabby, commonsense morality." (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3, Proper 7, p. 167)

It is important to remember that the sword Jesus brings is not a sword of our own making. It does not represent violence, or aggression, or partisanship. It is a sword of righteousness, a sword that can only be entrusted to the Prince of Peace. Like a pruning shear or a refining fire, it is a sword that offers to cut away all that keeps us tied to old ways of thinking and acting. It offers to liberate us from our prejudices, our fears, our sins, and our weakness. If we allow it to, it can free us to follow Jesus more closely, and to love the Lord God with all our hearts. Amen.