

The Sword and the Cross
Matthew 10:34-42
July 2, 2023

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 10: Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

I. The Sword

A young man in Japan still lived in the same house with his parents, but his parents no longer spoke to him. Until further notice, he was to be a stranger in his own home. His crime? Baptism. He'd left Buddhism because he believed in Jesus.

A young mother in Khartoum, Sudan, was reported recovering from a knife wound to her hand. In the past, she has suffered stab wounds to her abdomen and a broken leg, inflicted by the same man each time: her brother. She and her husband are currently destitute, if they are still alive, because masked men with weapons evicted them from their home. Why? They are Christians, and are to be punished for their faith.

In Iraq Easter services were cancelled at many Christian churches. Those that held services were ringed by walls of sandbags that turned them into heavily defended bunkers against bombs and bullets. Why? Because Christians were gathering to proclaim that "Christ is risen!"

In Canada somewhere, a church going family is at peace and enjoying a good life. Then son or daughter comes home from college and announces that he or she is moving in with a lover. They're "in love," and everybody does it after all. It's one of those situations where the parents always hoped it wouldn't happen, and they're not sure what to do. The path of least resistance is to give their blessing to the child and embrace the change, figure out a way to make the sin fit in with their beliefs. After all, if they stick to faithfully teaching the child what the Word of God says, it could get ugly. Every holiday when the family gathers for celebration will have an underlying tension that could easily boil to the surface.

With those for examples, it's hardly a mystery why Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword;" nor that He goes on to say, "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 a person's enemies will be those of his own household."

This text from today's Gospel lesson is a continuation of the account in Matthew, chapter 10, where Jesus sends out his disciples on their first missionary journey. Last week we looked at his warning that they would be rejected by many and today he broadens this warning to include all believers.

Many stumble over this saying of Jesus. Some will use it to argue that the Bible has errors and additions by man, because "there's no way that someone as loving and peaceful as Jesus would ever say something so violent and offensive." Jesus coming with a sword? That just can't be right, say those who maintain that the Savior is a kindly fellow who is there to nod and wink and make us feel better about all of our sins that offend Him. Others will rip this passage out of context to prove that Christians are a bloodthirsty lot: sure, they look harmless enough when they're dressed up on Sunday

mornings, but they're really around to take over the world and force everyone to follow their narrow moral code. Christians are the real problem, they say, unlike some other "religions that are peaceful." Look out, too, the devil tempts, because Jesus says He comes to break up your family—and who wants trouble under their own roof?

All such views seriously misunderstand what Jesus is saying. It's good for us to take a look at this passage and not shy away.

Why did Jesus come with a sword? Because there's a fight to be had. The world is under the bondage of sin, death and devil; and these foes won't give up without a fight. So Jesus comes to defeat them, and His use of the sword imagery is to say that there will be a battle, fighting and strife.

But note the sword and note how strangely the battle is fought in the Gospels. The sword with which Jesus fights is His Word. He is not fighting soldiers, Pharisees or other flesh and blood; but principalities and powers of darkness. You can't stab the devil or death with a knife—they're far beyond the reach of physical weapons. No, death and devil can only be prosecuted by the Word of God, and that is how Jesus fights the battle. Where demons possess people, Jesus speaks His Word and sends them fleeing away. Where death claims Lazarus and others, Jesus speaks His Word and the grave has to let go. Where the devil holds people in bondage and darkness by teaching them that they are beyond redemption or can save themselves by their works, Jesus speaks His Word to forgive them, to call them out of darkness into His marvelous light.

We hear the Gospel lessons, and we hear of Jesus teaching and healing, and we imagine that it's all a matter of peace and tranquility. That's why today's Gospel lesson catches us off guard, because we forget that every sermon Jesus preaches and every miracle He performs is war, an assault on the strongholds of sin, death and devil. But since He's doing the fighting beyond our sight, we fail to appreciate the battle.

We're also tempted to misunderstand when trouble arises.

We had a great example of this in a Gospel reading several weeks ago during the season of Lent, from John 9. Jesus healed a man born blind: He spit in the dirt, put mud on the man's eyes and sent him off to the pool of Siloam to wash it off. When the man born blind did so, he could see. And with that miracle, the trouble started. The Pharisees accused Jesus of healing with satanic powers, because Jesus had healed the man on the Sabbath. (Imagine! God healing people on the Sabbath!) The Pharisees brought in the man's parents and interrogated them: "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" (John 9:19) Threatened by the Pharisees and fearing excommunication, the parents threw their son under the bus and said, "Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself" (John 9:21).

When the Pharisees questioned the man who could now see, the man said of Jesus, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." And when the man went on to say that Jesus healed him with God's power, the Pharisees threw him out—they expelled him from the synagogue. Afterwards, Jesus found him and spoke His saving Word to him again.

Now, how would a spokesman for the Pharisees explain what had happened? He'd say, "This explains perfectly why this Jesus is a menace who must be stopped. When the day started, the man had a place in society. Sure, now he can see, courtesy of this Jesus; but now because he can see, he's estranged from his parents and excommunicated in a town where life revolves around the synagogue. That poor man may not have had sight, but he had peace. Now he sees, but he sees that he's now an outcast. Was that really worth it? This is all the fault of Jesus."

Faith sees a far different story. The man's blindness was a manifestation of the wages of sin, and Jesus came to defeat sin. So, when He encountered the man born blind, Jesus did battle. He spoke, He acted, and He defeated blindness and sin. Apart from Christ, the man was enslaved to sin and had no hope of salvation, so Jesus did battle. He spoke His Word of grace and gave the man forgiveness and life. When the Pharisees objected, Jesus rebuked them. Why? Because they were also enslaved to sin, so He went to battle once again in order to free them. But they didn't want to be free, and that's why there was trouble.

The sword is the Word, and the war is against sin, death and devil.

The trouble continues long after John 9, and it concludes during the Passover feast. The noted trouble-maker Jesus is arrested while committing the heinous act of praying in a garden. One of his thugs, named Peter, draws an actual sword and hacks off the ear of the high priest's servant. And what does Jesus do? He tells Peter to put the sword away, because Peter's got the fight all wrong: the devil wants to get Peter away from the Gospel by turning the fight into one against other people, so Jesus puts an end to that quickly. He heals the servant's ear—another attack by Christ upon the destruction sin brings.

Then Jesus, the noted trouble-maker, submits to beatings, sham trials and crucifixion. Why? Because it's on the cross that the war is won. Jesus bears all the sins that enslave mankind to the cross, and He suffers God's judgment for them there. Because He suffers for your sins, the devil has nothing left to accuse you with, and so the devil is defeated. Because He dies for your sin, you don't have to: so He rises again on the third day to demonstrate that death is defeated, too. The cross looks like Jesus defeated, but don't be deceived. He still wields His sword as He hangs dying; and His Words "It is finished" declare that the victory is His.

For now, sin and death and devil are still around, but the war is decided and these enemies are defeated. They cannot enslave you anymore unless you surrender to them, because Jesus has wielded the sword and won the victory.

II. The Cross

Therefore, you live as one redeemed, and Christ shares that victory with you. He made you a co-victor with Him when He baptized you, because there He joined you to His victorious death and resurrection. Every time He speaks His Word of forgiveness to you, He fends off sin, death and devil again. His Supper is part of the battle, too; because there He strengthens and preserves you in the one true faith—against these enemies—unto life everlasting.

All of this is accomplished by His Word. Ephesians 6:17 calls the Word the “sword of the Spirit,” and Hebrews 4:12 declares, “For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The Lord does not leave you unarmed: He gives you His Word. He speaks His Word to you to keep these enemies at bay from enslaving you once again.

He also gives you His Word to speak to others, so that they may be freed from the sin that enslaves them—so that they might be freed from death and devil, too.

To make sure you wield the sword correctly, Jesus also adds this: “And whoever does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me.” If it sounded strange to Jesus’ disciples that He came to bring a sword, it sounded far worse when He said that they were to take up a cross. Like a sword, a cross was a symbol of violence: but where the sword symbolized killing, the cross symbolized being killed. Being killed is usually not the path to victory over your enemies.

But for you, it is. Daily, you die to sin by repentance and forgiveness. Daily, you acknowledge that your life and righteousness come from Christ, not you. Daily, you give thanks to Jesus that He has won the war against undefeatable enemies for you. And daily, you give thanks for the privilege of speaking that Word to others, that they may be set free.

You also understand that, as one who bears the cross of Christ, you will be accused of causing trouble. You will suffer. You will encounter friends and family members who are trapped in sin: and because the least loving thing you can do is leave them dying, you’ll draw the sword—you’ll speak the Word of God against the sin and thus do battle with it. Sometimes, the friend or family member will repent, and you can rejoice together. At other times, they won’t: and you’ll be blamed for being the one who has caused trouble, who brought tension into the relationship, who made everybody uncomfortable. You’ll suffer wounds: but they’re not life-threatening because Christ has been wounded in His hands, feet and side for you.

Don’t be deceived! Every day you will do battle against sin, death and devil—defeated by Christ but still too much for you. That’s why you keep hearing God’s Word, keep speaking it. You don’t speak it to attack people—that’s the mistake of some Christians who believe that they can force people to be Christians by compelling them to follow God’s commands. That’s not bearing the cross, but wielding the Law apart from the Gospel. Nor do you remain silent, because the lack of God’s Word leaves people enslaved and dying. The failure to declare the victory leaves them condemned with the defeated.

There’s a reason why the Church is often called the Church Militant. As St. Paul introduces the armor of God, the sword of the Spirit included, in Ephesians 6, he says, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). You’re given God’s Word to speak, and not everyone will like it. You’ll be accused of causing trouble, but only because with the Word you have troubled the devil. You’ll be wounded as you bear the cross, but you are not defeated. Christ has fought the fight and defeated sin, death and devil. He has given you the victory—and with it, eternal life. You’ll suffer wounds from time to time, but the war is won and you will not die: because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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