

Sermon for 21st June 2026, Year A, Pentecost 4, Proper 7

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Matthew 10:24-39

Sermon

Jesus always brings peace, not violence. On any other Sunday this would pass without comment. Of course, Jesus brings peace. He is the Prince of Peace, and when he was born at Christmas, the angels sang Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.

And yet, here in this Gospel reading, Jesus says the opposite. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace, but a sword," and then he even goes on to point out that the main enemies of his new community of love will be located not in empires and armies, but within one's own family. "Whoever loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." What? Surely God created families to be places of love and care and safety. Why would Jesus be talking in this way?

There are also plenty of extreme religious groups that have used verses like this to justify cutting off one's family as a requirement to join some cult. Jesus must surely have known this would happen, so why is he saying these things? Should we pay any attention to these words today?

The main problem that we modern souls have in reading passage like this is that the society that Jesus is speaking to is enormously more dangerous and threatening than ours in the West today. In our culture, we can follow many of Jesus's teachings without any risk of falling out with our families, though it does still happen. Certainly, if we bang on about Jesus every time we meet the in-laws, there might eventually be some friction, but it's not quite going to be to the extreme that Jesus seems to be talking about.

Being kind and generous, compassionate and empathetic, forgiving and gentle – none of these aspects of good Christian character are likely to trigger our families and neighbours into murderous hostility, though today some people are starting to see such virtues as ‘woke’ rather than Christian, and they despise them.

But at worst, such people would likely simply take advantage of other people’s compassion, and to that Jesus said, ‘let them’ – turn the other cheek, give them your cloak if they ask for it, go two miles with them if they ask you to go one. It’s hard to see where the sword is going to come into play.

My sense is that what Jesus is teaching and asking of his disciples is much more challenging than it first appears. It is definitely not ‘nice guy’ stuff. If Jesus were just an enlightened and affirming nice guy who wants to make us feel good about ourselves, then surely he would have been able to stay out of trouble himself, and nobody would have been accusing him of being the literal prince of demons, Beelzebul.

The truth is that seeking God’s kingdom with pure-hearted, single-minded determination, is always likely to rub other people up the wrong way, because at some level, how a Christian lives their life is going to be an implicit criticism of other people, and sometimes most especially the people closest to you.

Again, this was significantly truer in Jesus’s day than perhaps in ours, at least in this part of the world. The first Christians faced huge family pressures to reject Jesus and his claims. There was little room for individualist religion in that culture; whole families would convert together or not at all. If the patriarch of your family rejected Jesus, then you were expected to, as well. Go against that authority and the sword would appear in your relationships very quickly indeed. Not that Jesus would be the one wielding the sword, but the sword would appear, nonetheless. We see this most clearly in so-called ‘honour killings’ which still occur in some cultures today.

Despite the strong modern association of Christianity with family values, Jesus was much more interested in what we might call 'kingdom values' or 'community values' – mutual solidarity and support, humility and self-sacrifice. Frequently, in the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as being in conflict even with his own family, or as the source of conflict within families. "Seek first the kingdom of God," he says, repeatedly. "Give away everything you have to the poor," he tells the rich men. You can imagine some wives and mothers, not to mention sons and daughters, who might not be terribly happy if the family patriarch gave away their comfort and wealth in favour of following Jesus. In the first few centuries of the Church, there are quite a few stories of this happening. Famously, St Anthony of Egypt, a wealthy landowner who became one of the very first desert monks in the fourth century, gave away all his possessions to the poor and then left his dependent sister in the care of a local women's refuge. We're not told what she thought of that. Maybe she cheered him on and supported him, we don't know.

But it should be no surprise, then, that such a complete transformation of loyalties might have serious repercussions both for those who embrace it, and for their families, and for wider society. Some people are going to feel very criticised and judged, and others are going to feel the loss of their privileges and comforts. Either way, the sword of division and conflict will not be far behind.

When I was a novice nun, a story was told in the community about how, several decades ago, an heiress from a wealthy family had asked to join the nuns, and the rule at the time was that in order to join you had to give over all your wealth and possessions to the community. While the woman concerned was quite happy to do this, her other family members were definitely not, and they sued to prevent it. As a result, since that time, while the requirement to give up all personal wealth remains, the beneficiaries of that wealth could now be anyone, not just the monastery, and so the sword of division was avoided.

Some aspects of following Jesus are easier in our day and age than two thousand years ago. We are not likely to get tortured or attacked for openly worshiping Jesus in church. If we demonstrate forgiveness and compassion in our everyday relationships, we will likely still be largely admired, not pitied for our weakness. If we are kind and supportive of our neighbours, we will be seen as a good asset to the community. No one will hate us for such things.

But for Jesus, this is still Sunday School stuff. These are the absolute basics. Jesus is always preaching extremes. “Sell everything you have and give to the poor.” “If you do not give up all your possessions, you cannot be my disciple.” “Seek first the kingdom of God and don’t worry about what you will eat or drink, or wear.” “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” And then there’s all those parables condemning wealthy, comfortable, superior people. The people who think they are first in life, will be last in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says. So, it sounds like we’re unlikely to meet many billionaires among the angels.

You can start to see why Jesus says he comes not to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. We are not left in a comfortable place. Our faith is always challenging us to go deeper, and trust in God more. We’ve made a little progress, perhaps, in the last two thousand years, but my sense is we still have some fair distance to go, to reach the kingdom of God that Jesus wanted us to seek with all our heart, all our mind, and with all our strength.