

Not peace, but a sword

It's six months since Christmas! How time flies.

And it's also six months to Christmas – only 182 shopping days to go.

So it's a while since we've have Christmas readings in church – but let me remind of one - Luke 2:14.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Does that sound familiar? Have you seen it on a Christmas card? What a great thing: On earth peace, and good will toward men.

That's the King James translation of Luke 2:14, but if we turn to a more recent translation – a more accurate translation, one closer to the original Greek – that verse reads slightly differently.

The New International Version, which is the translation we usually use in church, gives us “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”

It turns out that the translation that people are probably most familiar gives us a meaning that is not quite right. The message of that verse is not some sort of warm and fuzzy universal peace for all – instead, it's about a peace that is qualified. It's peace to those on whom God's favour rests. A peace that depends on people responding to an offer.

That better translation of Luke 2:14, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” Is something that we should keep in mind as we turn to today's gospel reading.

Because the words of Jesus in today's reading from Matthew 10 don't seem to be words we expect to hear from Jesus – they're not to be words of comfort and they're not words of reassurance. And they don't seem to be words of hope, either.

In fact, what Jesus says here seems to go against what most Christians would say Jesus was about. Yet, here it is – and not just in Matthew's gospel either – there's a similar passage in Luke's gospel (Luke 12:49-53).

When we read things like *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. (10:34) and For I have come to turn “a man against his father, [and] a daughter against her mother,”*(10:35) – it is disturbing and scary. At the very least, I think, it makes us uncomfortable.

I shared before that I think there's a tendency, when people come to parts of the bible that make them uncomfortable, to skip over – ignore – them, or to dwell on them.

I hope that we can find somewhere in the middle: that we don't routinely skip over bits of the bible that make us uncomfortable – because a bit of discomfort or a bit of disturbance can actually help us realise where we're going wrong and it can encourage or even help us to grow as well.

We know Jesus often challenged people – he told them things that disturbed them. Sometimes we think we can ignore those challenges, because they were directed at the pharisees and the teachers of the law, or the very wealthy – people that we don't particularly identify with (or perhaps that we don't like to be identified with).

Paul wrote to Timothy *"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,"* (2 Tim 3:16) – it's all scripture – the wholeness of scripture – that we need to take into account. So yes, today's gospel reading is disturbing, but what do we make of that in the context of the scriptures that tell us of God who loved the world so much he sent his son to save us?

Today's reading from Matthew's gospel, really doesn't fit with the image of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild", or the image we sometimes have of Jesus sort of guru-like figure passing serenely through the gospels.

I think the key verse of this reading is verse 34 *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."*

Hang on - Jesus said, "I did not come to bring peace"?

But we know Jesus is the prince of peace, don't we?

Blessed are the peacemakers and all that. The gospels portray Jesus as a bringer of peace, and Jesus' teaching bears that out.

But – and it's a big but - Jesus says here is that his peace is not unqualified. It's not peace as the world understands it. It's not simply the absence of conflict between people. It's not people being made to grudgingly accept things they're not happy with. Instead the peace that Jesus brings is peace between God and people – between God and us. The peace that Jesus came to bring is salvation. Reconciliation with God.

The effect of that is peace among people, but we can't have that without Jesus being involved.

So, for people to receive Jesus' peace, they need to accept Jesus. Those that reject Jesus don't have peace. And the result of accepting Jesus is the sword – cutting off – division, division from any and all who are not in harmony with Jesus.

Now that can be a scary thing to contemplate. But I think it is reflected in our experience, we know people who don't accept Jesus. Or maybe people who think he was merely a wise teacher, or whatever.

Paul sets it out clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he says *"...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing"* (1 Corinthians 1:18)– and unless we have that spark of faith, the message of the cross is crazy – that an all-powerful God, would give up his only son to die for sinful people. But if we have that spark of faith, Paul says *"but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"*.

As a result, people are going to always be divided. Those who think the gospel, the message of the cross is foolishness on one hand, and those of us who know it as the power of God on the other.

As Jesus said in verse 32 and 33 of today's reading: *"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."*

Acknowledging Jesus – following Jesus – is a choice: his grace is there for every one of us – indeed for all of us, but we each make our own choice. And that choice has a consequence: That choice determines what side of the sword – what side of the division – we're on.

And in today's reading, Jesus graphically describes the extent of the division: *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."* (10:35-36)

He's telling us about a change in the order of things – the way the nation of Israel at the time viewed their relationship with God.

The nation of Israel, we know from the Old Testament, were God's chosen people. The promises made to Abraham – father Abraham – in Genesis, and summed up in Exodus 6:7 *"I will make you my own people, and I will be your God."*

For the Jewish people of Jesus' time, it was a matter of claiming that inheritance. They believed they were 'right with God' because they were descendants of Abraham. But they'd become arrogant in that knowledge: God was their God, and God would look after them. They were either forgetting - or ignoring - the parts of the promises to Abraham that said the whole world would be blessed through them.

By the time of Jesus teaching though, they'd already had John the Baptist's preaching which warned them about this. You might remember it from Luke 3 *"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [...] Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham!"* (Luke 3:7-8)

And here Jesus warns that families would be divided: Fathers against sons. Mothers against daughters. And so on. Divided by the metaphorical sword. The traditional nation of Israel against the followers of Jesus.

Those that accept Jesus. And those who don't.

But just like the nation of Israel couldn't rely on inherited rights, neither can we. When we think about our relationship with God, it is just that, and that only that counts. Do we trust Jesus? Do we put our belief and faith and hope in him? Or do we not. Do we believe that he died and rose again for us? Or do we not?

It doesn't matter how long you've been going to church for, or which church you go to, or how many times a week you go to church, or how much you put in the offertory or whether

you've been baptised or confirmed, or whether you're on every roster. (Don't get me wrong – all those things are good things to do, but the key is: do we put our faith in Jesus?).

So that was a huge change for the nation of Israel to come to grips with. A change that John the Baptist preached, and Jesus confirms here. It's not a change in what God intended and it's not a change in what God promised: What Jesus and John before him taught was the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

So they should have known. They had the Old Testament. They read the scrolls of the law and the prophets regularly, they sang the psalms together. They should have known. The signs were all there.

We shouldn't be too harsh on them, though, because it's easy for us to see: We know the whole story now, we have the gospels and we have the Holy Spirit who helps us understand. But even so.... They should have known.

And I think it can easily be the same for us. There are things that we should know, but we don't always get them right.

I did SRE teacher training a few years ago, and at lunchtime, as good Protestants, we got talking about salvation by faith, not works. Half the people there were ministers, and the rest were people who were actively sharing faith in school scripture settings. So we all had a good scriptural understanding and we all absolutely knew that we didn't earn favour with God through doing things... but if you stood back and looked on that we were all doing and telling each other about, well it seemed we were all pretty keen on works.

As part of the discussion, the course leader offered the observation that people were human beings not human doings. So we were called to be Christians, not simply do Christian things.

There are things we should know, but we don't always get them right. We regularly confess our sins, and we are regularly reminded of God's forgiveness, aren't we? But how often do we find those sins continuing to weigh on us?

And so it is with the peace that Jesus came to bring. True peace. Reconciliation between God and people. But so often we dumb that down to the world's version of peace, something warm and fuzzy, where what is wrong with the world is simply ignored or glossed over.

But the peace Jesus came to bring does something about what is wrong. And that is God's judgement. Ultimately things can't be made right, without doing something about what is wrong.

And so we find that Jesus presence was divisive two thousand years ago. Jesus presence is still divisive today. It is not Jesus' purpose to disturb the peace, to cause division, but it is the result of people's response to him.

For Jesus - and for his followers then and now - peace is not merely the absence of conflict, because we can still be at peace with God, amidst great conflict in our lives and in our world.

Peace is not a truce or a period of quiet or not talking to others. Peace is the presence of God, even amidst all the noise and tension conflict brings. Christ's peace is lasting peace, not merely temporary truce.

That peace is there for us all, in the face of all the problems and trials of our lives.

Our challenge then, is to put our faith in Jesus, and to discern Jesus' way in the world. To remember that in this age there will always be division not peace in this world, division between those who accept Jesus, and those who reject him.

Jesus warned that those who chose to follow him would have trouble relating to those who did not so choose. And it's a tough thing, and I'm sure we've all experienced it in many ways in our own Christian journeys.

In verse 37 we heard that Jesus said *"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."* And that doesn't sit well with our society, where it seems that the love of our children is the most important thing there is. But here, Jesus says, no, you need to love me more. (But note he's not saying "don't love your children"). If you think about it, he's really just restating the great and first commandment ... *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind and with all your spirit"*.

It doesn't mean that you don't love your child. Love isn't something to be rationed out.

It's a tough thing. And the Christian journey will be – at least sometimes – hard going.

"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (10:38) God's plan is that all people should be saved, but people need to respond to the grace of God shown in Jesus.

And similarly, *"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for [Jesus'] sake will find it."* (10:39)

Jesus warned that those who choose to follow him in life will have trouble relating to those who did not so choose. The result of being a Christian is that we stand in opposition to many of the values and practices favoured by modern society, and there is always a price to pay for standing on principle. Jesus paid it with his life. But in doing that, he opened the way to true and everlasting peace, for us, and for all who turn to him in faith.

Amen.