

Reading Matthew 10:34-42

“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.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Sermon

When I was a student at university, there was a rumour that one of my professors had chosen this reading as her wedding reading. Whether this is true or not, I do not know, but I like to think it is. It would not only be a surprising choice for a wedding reading, but it is generally a rather surprising text considering that Jesus promoted peace and non-violence wherever he went.

Jesus is the peacemaker. He is the Prince of peace who came to this earth to bring reconciliation and justice. He said things like: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (John 14:27) or "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). He taught us the greatest commandment of all, the leading principal of Christianity: "You shall love God with all your heart, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22:37) He says: "Just as I have loved you, you shall love one another." (John 13:34) He taught us not to fight violence with more violence, but to interrupt the cycle of evil. "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." (Matthew 5:39) He invites us to go the extra mile and to open the doors for the hungry neighbour at night. He encourages us to pray and not to fight, to share a meal and not to look down on others who have less than us. Once the disciples asked Jesus: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick in prison, and did not take care of you?" Jesus answered: "What you did not do to the least of these, you did not do to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:45) The message of Jesus is clear: we will be measured by our good deeds, by our ability to build peace, welcoming the stranger and establishing justice.

And yet, this is not the full story. The Bible is full of violence: between God and humans, between neighbouring peoples, families and individuals or as a mean of state oppression against certain social groups. How is it possible to reconcile the violent parts of the Bible with the teaching of peace and non-violence? Violence is part of the biblical image of God, especially in the Old Testament. This becomes problematic when certain religious groups or individuals take God's sometimes violent authority as justification for their own violent actions. This can easily happen if we read the Bible all too literally as God's authoritative word, rather than as a document that reflects people's experiences with God in a specific time and age. If we don't critically reflect the Bible on its historic background, it can indeed be read in parts as a call to violence against others. We only need to open the newspapers to

understand where this can lead to. Jesus however teaches a very different message. He offers us the image of a peaceful, yes even suffering God. And yet, there is violence in the Gospels as well.

Easter reminds us of the most violent and brutal part of the Gospels: the crucifixion of Jesus. This is not the image of a violent and all powerful God, but rather it is the image of a suffering and powerless God, a God who walks with us, who does not fight evil with evil, but who goes the way of humiliation and non-violence. The crucifixion is the story of our violence against God.

And then there are passages in Gospels, sayings of Jesus that do not quite add up with his otherwise peaceful message. We have just heard that he once said: I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. He said: "I have come to set the son against his father, and the daughter against her mother." The sword that will divide families in Jesus' name is not to be mistaken for a call to violence. The disciples will not be the executors of violence, but the recipients. Defending the values of the Kingdom of God can lead to hostility and division, yes even aggression. Not the disciples will turn a sword against others, rather the sword will be turned against them, just as it will be turned against Jesus and finally kill him. This is not a call to physical violence, but rather it is a warning that if we take the Gospel seriously we will encounter division. To be a Christian does not just mean to be nice to everyone. It means to stand up for the values that Jesus Christ has taught us, even if it hurts.

When I first moved to England, I learnt quickly that there are three topics to be avoided around every dinner table: religion, politics and money. These are topics that can divide people and create deep gaps. As a student of theology and nowadays as a vicar I have often experienced this. To defend Christian values is not only a peaceful journey. I remember difficult and painful arguments with members of my family and with friends who misunderstood my choices or didn't quite know what to

make of it. I felt estranged, like if I had to choose. And yet, there was no going back for me. The teaching of Jesus to welcoming the stranger and to building a Kingdom of justice empowering and speaking up for those at the margins is not negotiable. To share and to care and to see the light of God in every single person, especially in those who suffer, is something I am not willing to give up. We have to ask ourselves: are we ready to accept the sword of division in defence of our Christian values?

There is another passage where Jesus even promotes the purchase of a sword. In Luke chapter 22 verse 36, the night before they were to enter Jerusalem where Jesus would be arrested by the authorities and crucified, he says to his disciples: "The one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one." These words seem to contrast Jesus' teaching of non-violence. He encourages his disciples to buy swords. So is this a call to violent resistance, to fight violence with violence? Not really, for when the disciples show him that they already possess two swords he simply says: "Two are enough." Enough for what? With two swords they will hardly be able to resist the authorities and to defend Jesus. Later Jesus even tells Peter to put away the sword when he wants to use it against the soldiers who arrest Jesus. Jesus wanted to mentally prepare his disciples for the violence they were about to experience. The atmosphere in Jerusalem would be more tense than what the disciples were used to from other parts of the country. As so often in his teaching, Jesus uses a physical object, the sword in this case, to explain what he means. The sword is therefore not a call to physical violence, but rather it is a warning for his disciples and followers, a warning for us that we have to arm ourselves mentally, because the way of non-violence and justice will not always be met with peacefulness. Jesus fought for his values. He risked division in his own family and he divided his disciples from their families to go the radical way of justice with him.

As followers of Jesus we have to make a choice: are we ready to defend our Christian values? Are we ready to welcoming the stranger and to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and those in prison or do we make concessions for the sake of artificial peace in our immediate environment? Jesus was radical throughout his lifetime, sometimes angry and aggressive like when he overturned the tables of the merchants at the Temple yard in Jerusalem. He was radical and he expected his disciples to be radical too and not to shy away from division. And yet in the end Jesus was radically non-violent when he took his place on the cross. He chose the way of humiliation, and after three days he rose from the dead bringing hope and strength and faith to us, his followers, to continue what he had started, and to stand up for justice and for all those people who have no voice in our world, humiliated and powerless like God.

Amen