

Mt 10.24-39

By God's Grace may I speak in his name who is Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

These words of Jesus make me stop every time I read them. They seem strange, out of place. Isn't Jesus all about teaching us to love, to serve, forgive and seek peace? The same Jesus a bit earlier in the sermon on the mount tells his listeners to turn the other cheek if someone strikes them on the right one. And again, the same Jesus later, when he gets arrested, tells his disciples not to fight against the soldiers and even heals the ear, one of his disciples cut off with a sword. He then lets himself be arrested without a fight. He endures brutal torture without lashing out to his torturers. And finally, he dies the most shameful death the Roman Empire had to offer on the cross, all the while being mocked by the crowd for not saving himself.

How are we to understand Jesus' words, “... I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”, in the light of all this? What is it? Violence or non-violence? What does it mean to follow Jesus?

What Jesus is saying here is not a call for Christians to violently fight anyone who isn't a Christian. Reading the gospels, it is abundantly clear that Jesus' message is about loving our neighbour, serving, forgiveness and seeking peace. But with his provocative words here Jesus clarifies an important point: Following Jesus is not living in a fluffier reality, where everything is a bit rose-coloured. Following Jesus is costly, it's not for the fainthearted. Why is that?

Because Jesus challenges the powerful and privileged. Because Jesus challenges systems of oppression and injustice as he reaches out to the poor and the outcasts. He challenges by not playing the game as it always has been played. He does not stage an uprising, but despite his rising popularity and fame, he continues to spend his time with the

powerless, the poor and the outcasts. Jesus identifies with them, rather than with the powers that be. Jesus sees their suffering, he forgives, heals and gives people hope. And that changes the atmosphere. Those that have been told over and over again that they are worthless and don't matter, he teaches that they are infinitely precious to God and that their lives matter to him. That makes him dangerous to those in power. That is why they want him out of the way. Why he ends up on a cross. That is why following Jesus is costly and takes courage. Because following him means to subvert systems of oppression and injustice, by living differently. It means to see in every human being a beloved, precious creature and to treat them accordingly. No matter their social standing, the colour of their skin, their bank account, sexual orientation, gender or mental and physical health.

To live in such a way is challenging, it's costly and takes courage. And we should not be surprised, if it provokes conflict. If it means that even our nearest and dearest might turn away from us. It does not mean; we shouldn't love and care for our families and friends. But their disapproval should not stop us from loving, serving, forgiving and seeking peace as Jesus taught us. Following Jesus and loving him more than power and status, more even than our families, might cost us everything. And there are plenty of examples of Christians, who have even paid with their lives for doing so.

Many of Jesus' first disciples were executed for their faith. Over the entrance of Westminster Abbey there are the statues of ten modern martyrs. They are all people who followed Jesus, many of them explicitly died for their resistance to systems of oppression and injustice. Some of them you might know, some of them you might have never heard of. They are the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, Manche Masemola, Maximilian Kolbe, Lucian Tapiede, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Esther John, Martin Luther King, Wang Zhiming, Janani Luwum and Oscar Romero. All these men and women followed Jesus and stood with the poor and oppressed, when it wasn't popular. Father Maximilian Kolbe was executed by Nazis in a concentration camp, when he offered his life in exchange for the life of a fellow prisoner. Manche Masemola was beaten to death by her family, because she refused to stop going to church.

Martin Luther King was killed, because he led non-violent protests opposing racial segregation. All these martyrs have inspiring stories and if you have a little time this afternoon, it might be worth looking them up.

Hearing all this you might feel a bit overwhelmed and discouraged. Maybe you're a bit like me, wondering if I would have the courage to follow Jesus' example when it really matters. Would I risk speaking out against discrimination, even if it might cost me my good standing with friends, family or my boss? Do I really have what it takes to love and reach out to the outcasts, the homeless, addicts and those who suffer from mental illness? Will I love, forgive and serve when it's hard and costly?

The good news is, we can ask God for these things and he will fill us with the Holy Spirit, who will enable us to love, forgive, seek peace and serve. Following Jesus is not for the fainthearted, it will not always make us popular. But we do not have to do it in our own strength. If we decide to follow him, he will provide us with the love, strength and courage to do so.

Amen



<https://www.westminster-abbey.org/about-the-abbey/history/modern-martyrs>