



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**21 June 2020: Sunday Worship**

**The Second Sunday after Trinity**

**Romans 6:1b–11, Matthew 10:24–39**

**The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology**

**‘Not Peace, but a Sword’**

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10.34).

This must be one of the most perplexing statements ever made by Jesus. It’s perplexing to those of us who identify ourselves as Jesus’ followers, because we tend to characterise the Way of Jesus in terms of love, of the repudiation of violence, of forgiveness, of reconciliation. And, of course, there’s no dearth of support for that characterisation to be found in the Gospels. Jesus means ‘peace’ So how on earth can he also mean the ‘sword’?

The answer lies earlier in this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew. “What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops” (10.27). The followers of Jesus are commanded to speak the truth, to bear witness in public to it: “what you hear whispered, proclaim”.

The problem is that there are some truths that are not welcome, truths that people don’t want to hear. I for one know that from my own experience, and I expect that you do too. Some truths hurt the flattering perception of ourselves that we harbour, showing that we’re not all that we’re cracked up to be, exposing the painful gap between our public persona and our private conduct. Some truths threaten a view of the world—maybe religious, maybe political—in which we’ve become heavily invested, shaking our identity and what we thought we were all about. Some truths make practical demands upon us that are inconvenient, uncomfortable, and costly. Some truths are not welcome.

And when people are confronted with unwelcome truths, they react with anger, shooting the messenger, scapegoating him, projecting their own guilt onto him. That’s exactly what happened

to Jesus, of course. Because the chief priests and the Pharisees were threatened by Jesus, because he exposed their hypocrisy and their sanctimonious domineering over lesser mortals, and because he challenged their political authority and control, they drove him onto the cross.

As with the master, so with his disciples. “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul [the Devil], how much more will they malign those of his household” (25b). This is what the followers of Christ should expect, if they do as they are called to do and utter in the light what has been revealed to them in the dark. They should expect to be made to carry their own crosses (10.38).

But note: the violence comes from others, not from Jesus’ followers. All the Christians do is to speak the truth. So, when Jesus said, “I have come ... to bring ... a sword” (10.34), what his hyperbolic statement meant, was not that he himself would wield a sword against others, but that his words would cause others to wield it against him.

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It’s the Christian’s calling to speak unpopular truths, even if it be at the cost of sowing division and indirectly causing violence. However, there is a spiritual temptation that arises here. So, to pick up the terms of our first reading from St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, what is the relevant sin that needs to be destroyed, if we are to rise with Christ from the dead (Romans 6.4)? What specific sin must be rendered dead and buried, if we are to speak unpopular truths Christianly?

One candidate is the sin of provocation or, perhaps more exactly, the sin of needling. In one sense, Jesus was often provocative. His parables are often provocative in the sense that they are designed to confront and directly challenge common assumptions. Thus, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus shows how the Jewish priest and the Levite, both fastidiously pre-occupied with their religious business, walked by the robbed and wounded man, whereas it’s the Samaritan who stopped and tended to him. That is to say, the one who actually obeys the Law of Moses, the one who actually loves his neighbour, is—paradoxically, provocatively—a heretic.

So, Jesus was often provocative, aiming to creep up on the cosy assumptions of his audience and shock them into awareness of the truth. He provoked, but he didn’t needle. Needling is the sin. It’s the turn of phrase, the off-hand remark, the tone that mocks, ridicules, expresses contempt or disdain. It aims to insult and sting. It’s a vindictive, even sadistic form of malice. But what’s wrong with it is not only that it poisons the soul of the one who dishes it out. What’s wrong with

it is that it also makes it much harder for the one on the receiving end to get the message. It corrupts and obstructs his hearing with hot resentment. My 17th century hero, Lucius Cary, put it well:

I have ever thought that there should bee as little bitterness in a treatise of controversie, as in a love-letter, and that the contrary way was void both of Christian charity, and humane wisdom, as serving onely ... to fright away the game, and make their adversarie unwilling to take instruction from him, from whom they have received injuries, and making themselves unabler to discover the truth (which Saint Au[gu]stine sayes is hard for him to find who is calme, but impossible for him that is angry) ....

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Christians are called to speak the truth in public. Where the truth is unwelcome, speaking it will cause conflict. But the culpability for conflict lies with those who refuse the truth, not those who give it.

Nevertheless, to speak the truth, even provocatively, is one thing. To needle is another. If we would rise with Christ, then we need to nail needling to the Cross.