

## Lent 1

*'I have not come to bring peace but the sword.'* Matthew 10 v34

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Almighty God,  
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness  
and was tempted as we are yet without sin;  
give us the grace to discipline ourselves  
in obedience to your Spirit;  
and, as you know our weakness  
so may we know your power to save.

My text for today's sermon may be found in the gospel according to Matthew chapter 10 and verse 34 *'I have not come to bring peace but the sword.'*

As a youngman, a verse which grabbed my attention, caught my imagination, was a verse from St Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4 and verse 7: *'the peace of God which surpasses all understanding . . .'* That, I thought, was something worth having, something, as a teenager, I longed for.

Well, you can't be much further from that thought of perfect peace than this verse from Matthew. Jesus, in Matthew chapter 10, is speaking to the twelve. He's preparing to send them out on a mission and he's preparing them for the task ahead. Not easy to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom and they will meet with opposition. And it is in the context of opposition, of spiritual warfare, that

Jesus says this hard verse which is our challenge today: 'I have not come to bring peace but the sword.'

'I have not come to bring peace but the sword' is the start of our series of six sermons in Lent which tries to wrestle with hard verses, which tries to understand some difficult teaching at the heart of Christianity. And the challenge for us this morning is simply the idea that Jesus has come not to bring peace but the sword.

I know Peter had a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and he used it to cut off the ear of one of the servants of the High Priest who was part of the gang sent to arrest Jesus. Jesus, however, rebukes Peter saying, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.' (Mt26 v52) But here, when Jesus says what he comes to bring is the sword, what he says is a symbol – figurative not literal truth. In truth, the virtue of a sword lies in the fact that it is a sharp weapon, suitable for a fight, suitable to defend the truth and to maintain the right. Now, I do appreciate, accept, that the history of Christianity is not blood-free. In the name of Christ, we have killed other Christians; in the name of Christ, we have killed Jews and Moslems alike. The history of the Crusades and that of the Thirty Years War contain truths that make me deeply uncomfortable.

But the struggle that I think Jesus is encouraging us to embrace is spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness, a spiritual warfare against a morality that dehumanises people. The sword that we are being called to wield is the sword of the spirit, the sword which is the word of God, the Bible. Inspired by the Holy Spirit and informed by the word of God, as Christians, we are enabled to engage

in the war for the soul of Man. We are all made in the Image of God and respect for and love of our neighbours as we love God and love ourselves is what we are being called on to do. So we cannot be at peace, at rest, until we engage with what is going on around us, until we have done our duty and played our part in this universal struggle against the powers of darkness that seek to diminish all mankind.

So, this morning, let me leave you with the paradox that as faithful Christians we are all promised true peace which surpasses understanding but part of that peace for us as Christians is to be properly engaged in the spiritual battle that is raging all around us.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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