

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 21 June 2020

Lord God, help us to know your ways; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you, we wait all day long. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

Not peace, but a sword!

For a few weeks, we are continuing the conversation with Jesus about discipleship. On hearing him saying, “For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law¹, we can’t help but think what one’s family has to do with the discipleship. This question is what we’ll think about today in this order. First, we’ll see what involves in discipleship. Next, we’ll think about the role of a sword in the bible. Lastly, the life of the church as Jesus’ disciples will be followed.

1. *What involves in discipleship?*

Family is the most basic unit in any human society. We were born to a family from which we learn most of the things. Family shapes a child’s world view too. Nowadays, the nuclear family unit is more common. But in Jesus’ time, a family usually meant a large clan where the father had the authority over all the members of the family. It was also tightly interwoven by blood and land that couldn’t easily be broken by any means. As such, Jesus’ saying seems extraordinary, especially when he said, ‘I have not come to bring peace but sword.’ Until now, the disciples had to leave many things behind. They had to break with their previous manner of living, such as their jobs, their duties for a family such as letting one’s father buried by others.² Later, they were called upon to abandon their families.³ Indeed, his sayings looked too harsh for many followers to receive. But on the flip side, Jesus called them as his mother and brothers.⁴ It is because the sword that Jesus had brought would dismantle one’s family unit that was tightly joined by blood bond to be a re-formed new family unit, namely God’s family. In short, Jesus’ remarks of radical self-denial are summed up in taking up one’s cross to follow him.⁵ In doing so, we begin to live like Jesus that not only enables us to endure sufferings but also to live beyond death. Here the word ‘sword’ holds the key that will help us understand it.

2. *The meaning of a sword in the bible*

Jesus says that his vocation is not of peace but a sword. It doesn’t look like a Jesus whom we know. Here the word sword is a symbolic expression to point out how his presence and his name will cause division.⁶ The word ‘sword’ (μάχαιρα, ης, ἡ machaira) originally meant ‘knife.’ Most often it refers to the small (short) sword or the dagger.⁷ Swords are found along with clubs in the hands of those who came to arrest Jesus.⁸ The sword also belongs to the equipment of prison guards (Acts 16:27). In John 18:10,⁹ Peter also used the sword in defence of Jesus by striking the high priest’s slave, and eventually, he cut off his right ear. A sword is also one of spiritual armour¹⁰ alongside the breastplate (of righteousness), the shield (of faith), and other weaponry which was common to a heavily armed foot soldier of ancient Greece (hoplites). In Ephesians 6:17, the sword is depicted as the Spirit, which is the word of God.¹¹

¹ Matthew 10:35

² Matthew 8:21f ... “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

³ Luke 14:26

⁴ Matthew 12:49

⁵ Matt 16:24-25 cf. Matt 10:38

⁶ Matthew 10: 35-37

⁷ While ῥομφαία is used of the literal (long) sword, and ξίφος refers to the rapier.

⁸ Mark 14:43; Matt 26:47; Mark 14:48 ;Matt 26:55/Luke 22:52

⁹ Mark 14:47; Matthew 26:51; Luke 22:49

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 10:4; Ephesians 6:11-17

¹¹ In Heb 4:12 the same association of word and sword appears, but used differently: the λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ, sharper (τομώτερος) than a sword, can both divide and—laying bare—judge.

As such, dismantling the existing family unit, which is one of the strongest of human organizational systems by the sword – the word of God tells a lot. Here Jesus does not offer a simple rejection of a family. Obedience to Jesus will *relativize* household relationships rather than abolish them.¹² Jesus' message does not suggest that the sticking together of families necessarily reflects faithfulness or that by family solidarity society's ills will be remedied. Instead, Jesus calls into question an idolatry of the family and warns that the gospel may divide rather than unite the home.¹³

3. ***Life of the church as Jesus' disciples***

Most of us can probably have someone who has helped us become who we are, a teacher or pastor or family member. The intensity of the life of discipleship demands will require a parallel intensity in the bond we have with Jesus. The church life that lacks this underlying understanding of discipleship may not go well with Jesus. To become an apostolic witness, according to Jesus, is to reproduce the life of the teacher in the student.

Paul expressed this relationship as follows. "The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."¹⁴ When saying about believer's dying and rising with Christ, Paul compares slavery with freedom. In baptism, our former self dies, and the new life emerges in Christ. As such, we are no longer enslaved to sin but has been given freedom from sin (v. 7). Here freedom is not a kind of license by which we do whatever as we wish. Rather freedom, Pauls says, means a freedom from the power of sin. For Paul, people are always and inevitably enslaved to something or someone. In Paul's view, real freedom is to restore the right relationship with God, who is the creator and redeemer of humankind. That is, '...having been set free from sin, we have become slaves of righteousness.'¹⁵

Martin Luther said the same in light of the life of the church – "Anyone who is to find Christ must first find the church. How could anyone know where Christ is and what faith is in him unless he knew where his believers are?" Channelling Martin Luther's words, C. S. Lewis expressed it plainly: "The Church exists for nothing else but to draw [people] into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time."¹⁶

In our story time, we heard a story of stone soup. The question was, 'what has the stone soup brought to the village people?' What's your answer? The stone soup has brought the sword to dismantle the high thick walls that have insulated villagers to the point that made them lost their duty to love others as one's self. The elements of the sword in this story were pot-full water, a simple stone and the fire to boil it. In the end, the simple action was enough to help the villagers see a new life that is sustainable continually. The soup was delicious, and it fed the entire village. Will such a thing can happen here? If we are freed from sin and when we choose to live freely in Christ, it will surely happen today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

¹² Matthew 19:29

¹³ Jesus' another saying in 10:39 about the losing of life for the sake of Christ is how life is experienced and truly discovered is in the same line of thoughts.

¹⁴ Romans 6:10-11

¹⁵ Romans 6:18

¹⁶ C. S Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p199.