

Lessons

Genesis 21: 8 – 21

Romans 6: 1b – 11

St Matthew 10: 24 – 39

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

Sacred Presence permeating all things, Eternity dwelling in the temporal, open our eyes that we may see You afresh, the inner eye that we may be aware of You, penetrate the darkness of Your Being. Amen.

Westminster Bridge, Manchester Arena and Finsbury Park Mosque have shocked, distressed and drained us of energy and life these past few weeks. The images of death and the thought of unimaginable suffering time after time take their toll. We have been horrified at the tragedy of Grenfell Tower. So much of the news we have watched or read has not been good. On top of that, as a nation, we continue to wrestle with deep and seemingly intractable divisions: Remain or Leave, Nationalist or Pro-Union. Has there ever been a time in living memory when the demands on our political leadership have been greater? Perhaps we ask or expect too much? I have also been saddened by the wanton destruction of the Grand Mosque of al-Nuri by ISIS: proof, if proof were needed, that ISIS is not motivated by its love of Islam. How could they bring such violence to an ancient place of sacred beauty?

As happened in the attack at Westminster Bridge so at Finsbury Park. the terrorist who carried out the attack was cared for by those he had moments earlier tried to murder. It is to the credit of Imam Mohammed Mahmoud that he and others protected the terrorist: 'Don't touch him! No one touch him!' Newspapers carried photographs of many Muslim men – sombre and shattered - kneeling in prayer on the pavement where their friends and brothers were injured. We may look at the blackened burned out shell of Grenfell Tower and ask of God, 'Why is this possible?' We may look at the Tower, at the flats that once were homes, and ask of humanity: 'How could people and systems permit flammable material to be strapped around on the entire building?' Quite apart from any strains and stresses we may be carrying in the privacy of our own life, our national life is unsettled. Responsible political leadership must call and work for restraint, dialogue, reconciliation and resolution.

On first reading our Gospel lesson this week offers us little comfort. Jesus said, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.' Jesus said:

For I have come to set a man against his father,

and 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.

What are we to make of the sword which Jesus brought? What of foes in one's own family? What is the family of the Finsbury Park terrorist going through now? What do families think when one of their own appears as a terrorist, a suicide bomber, on national news? Are the words of Jesus at all relevant to these families in these circumstances? Jesus said, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.' Is there something in Jesus' message which justifies violence?

The late Robert Davidson, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and Professor of Old Testament at the University of Glasgow, said, 'In the hands of the ignorant, the Bible will confirm their every prejudice.' Another saying which I like is: 'a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text'; in other words, once we discard the context, a text or verse can mean what we want it to mean. How could the words of Jesus about peace and a sword conceivably justify or excuse indiscriminate violence?

We know this Man Jesus of Nazareth, this Galilean rabbi who shared the shalom of the Sacred, who promised a peace this world cannot give. As a teacher, Jesus practised inwardness: He sought and shared His God-centred consciousness. In the Gospel of Matthew, just five chapters earlier, at the outset of His ministry Jesus had gone up a mountain and preached the greatest sermon ever preached. He told the crowd, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.' At the end of His ministry, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when one of those with Jesus struck the ear of the High Priest's slave with a sword, Jesus said, 'Put your sword back into its place: for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.' What, then, did this Man of peace mean when He said, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword'?

Jesus practised God-centred consciousness. The Benedictine monk, the late John Main, said:

Our lives are not only busy, they are usually noisy.  
But if our life is to be charged with meaning, to have  
depth and to be a true growth in consciousness, we  
have to be rooted in silence, rooted in the spirit,  
in the mystery whose depth can never be plumbed  
and whose meaning is found only in the consummation  
of union.

Jesus craved ever deeper and more intimate union with the Divine; He taught His followers to be like Him. He encouraged His disciples to be like their teacher and master. God knows us intimately: the number of hairs on our head; the Eternal feels the fall of every sparrow from the sky. The sword which Jesus brought and brings is to the soul. He was a teacher of inwardness: Jesus knew that every evil, every act of selfishness, every bout of badness and every deed of the small self, began life in the soul, in the human heart. The sword He brought, the conflict He sought, was within.

Jesus goes on to say, '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.' In the Jewish writings, the Babylonian Talmud, we read of a dialogue between Alexander the Great and the Jewish Elders:

He [Alexander the Great] asked them [the Jewish Elders], 'What shall a man do to live?' They replied, 'Let him kill or deny himself'. [He asked] 'What should a man do to kill himself?' They replied, 'Let him keep himself alive.'

In a separate Jewish source, we read, 'If it be your will that you should not die, die that you may not die.' There is a genre here in

Jewish thinking that, in order to enter life in all its fullness, in order to flourish as human beings, we must wrestle the demons within, overcome them, and let the Spirit of God lead us and fill us. The sword which Jesus brings is to cut away everything that diminishes us: every petty jealousy, every act of spite, every craving of superiority or desire to belittle others. We are to prefer Jesus: let the God who flourishes in Him, who also is in us, flourish in us, that our will and the will of God be one.

When the apostle Paul wrote of being baptised into Christ, buried with Christ and raised to newness of life in Christ, he meant our intimate union with Christ. Inwardly, in the inner life, we are one with Christ, baptised, buried and raised with Him. It is not something that happens at death; it is now. The more we cut away the small self, the shallow self, the more we will be filled by the Spirit of the Holy One.

The Jewish scholar, Laura Bernstein, poses an interesting problem.

She writes:

If Jeshua [Jesus] had seen a Roman soldier dragging a Jewish girl into an alley way, [if he saw him violently assaulting her], would he have walked by indifferently?

Of course not. Would he have intervened? Certainly. Would he have used force if necessary to protect the girl? I believe so. Might he have wrestled the sword from the Roman and used it on the Roman if necessary? Perhaps..... If he fails to make every effort to protect the girl, how could Jeshua claim to love his neighbour as himself?

Bernstein does not stop there. She goes on:

But is the Roman soldier not Jeshua's neighbour, too? And even if he is an enemy in this situation, has not Jeshua exhorted us to love our enemies? Wouldn't Jeshua be loving to the Roman by allowing him to [violently assault] the girl? The question answers itself. Loving someone means calling that person to live in truth, and truth entails respect for others.

Jeshua would not be loving the Roman by allowing him to live in a way where it was all right for him to assault people. That would be allowing the Roman to live a lie, the false notion that the Jewish girl did not deserve his respect. Love comes in many forms, and restraining evil is one of them.

It is quite a thought to imagine Jesus in such a scenario: we do not often think of Jesus saving a girl from assault or a Roman from himself. The Imam at Finsbury Park sought to care for the injured and at the same time protect the assailant from himself, and from the anger of those nearby. The sword which Jesus brings is to the demons inside which seek to disfigure us. It is this sword which breaks the cycle of revenge and is therefore very likely to set son against father, mother against daughter and one family member against another. When a member of a family wishes to break the

cycle of revenge – the family having suffered a hurt – is a decision which may well bring division. The sword which Jesus brings is to the demons inside which seek to disfigure us.

Amen.