

“...not peace, but a sword...” There are no more curious words coming from Jesus’ mouth in all of the gospels. Our ‘heaven born prince of peace’ shouldn’t talk like that.

I get that the gospels were put to paper during a time of great disturbance – conflicts along religious lines were heating up in the decades following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Those formerly frightened and confused disciples were finding their way – and their voices – with the help of the Holy Spirit, and the powers that be had become frightened and confused. Conflict was assured. So, I’ve no doubt that families were being torn apart over religious questions. No doubt that the very idea of God restoring/bestowing abundant life on those who have been oppressed by political, economic, social and religious burdens of human design was the catalyst for conflict. The idea of Jesus bringing a sword to that fight might have been a great comfort.

But Jesus is no warrior king. On that point, the gospels are very clear. No matter how we have imagined God’s kingdom coming, it does not come at the point of a sword.

The Psalmist tries to balance these conflicting ideas too – with little success. God is our refuge and strength,” the poet says ‘a very present (well proved) help in trouble.’ But what does that help look like?

Nations in an uproar – kingdoms tottering- - the earth...melts. The imagery is confusing – because God’s peace does not always mean the absence of human turmoil.

God in the midst – God speaks into the chaos. In the beginning, chaos was tamed. Human influences on Creation have always had an unsettling effect. Chaos and God’s peace now seem to exist side-by-side. And we must choose.

We must be aware; we have to decide where we will place our confidence.

Some will give over to chaos, for many fearful, bullying, power mongers have imagined safety in chaos. It gives them liberty for their own excesses – it gives them license to create more chaos. This is why the world is how it is right now. Call it the residue of original sin, or call it human nature – call it what you will, the Psalmist reports their own experience, and it sounds too much like our own experience.

And still, in that terrifying, chaotic reality, the Psalmist sees hope – the Psalmist hears the voice of God; ‘be still, and know that I am God.’ The hopeful refrain that runs through this Psalm reminds us that we can still chose God – who does not abandon us to chaos.

But **WE** must choose.

That is what makes this morning’s passage from Matthew so difficult. “Whoever loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me...” Could Jesus possibly be so needy? So arrogant? So demanding? Parents – children – cast aside? Who could make such a choice? Why would it be necessary?

Well, it’s not required...but it does happen.

Jesus knows about the chaotic state of human society. Jesus is always aware of the delicate balance that holds families together, and he knows that it doesn’t take much to shatter those bonds. And what Jesus represents is not a minor squabble amongst siblings. Jesus call to seek and serve God – Jesus’ call to bring a peaceable kingdom into being – Jesus single-minded devotion to God - these are seriously disruptive ideas in a chaotic world.

Don’t believe me? Try to speak peace into a political debate. Try to make the argument for more compassion – more grace – more housing at less cost – more food for less profit. Disruptive ideas like these set father against son, mother against daughter, neighbour against neighbour. All because someone chose to take Jesus seriously.

Jesus is not promoting division. He is not demanding we choose sides, but he knows that we will need to choose sides.

We will each have to choose – if we haven't already – between capitalism and compassion; between the celebration of ourselves and serenity for all humankind. We are faced every day with decisions that drag us between chaos and peace, and all the while, Jesus stands with us; his life and work, his death and resurrection, his compassionate choices offering witness to both the cost and the reward inherent in our choices.

The most interesting and hopeful translation of these challenging Jesus-words is one I found in the Anchor – the implication is that Jesus did not come to force the world into peace (neither to bring on the advent of war) the choice is ours and it is constantly before us.

The kingdom of God is a gradually unfolding thing here on earth (the constancy of the eternal realm is another thing entirely) Jesus' call is for here and now, and the peaceful reign of God is always set against the chaotic desires of humanity. Friction abounds – sparks fly – but one thing remains. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.