

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

1 Timothy 1:2 ...Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Putting away the Sword”

Lent 2, 2007 (Midweek Service)

Introduction: The Sword in the News

Most of us begin our day with the TV or radio on. We hear about conflicts in places like Rwanda or Darfur without even bothering to find out where those places are. We hear about the latest death toll in Iraq and go about our day without the number even registering. We have been so blessed with peace in the US that we shocked when a Pearl Harbor or 9-11 type event happens.

Jesus and his disciples did not have that luxury. They lived in a violent world. You could not travel from one town to another without the risk of bandits. Conflict between the Jewish nation and the Roman Empire was always simmering in the background. And Jewish religious and political factions fought one another just like factions in Iraq do today.

Buying a Sword

Before Jesus left this world, he needed to prepare his disciples to spread his word in a violent world. Jesus told his disciples:

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.¹

This is one of those cryptic statements that you have to think about a little bit. So is the next verse I will quote. Shortly before the scene described in today's lesson Jesus told his disciples:

¹ NIV Matthew 10:16

But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.²

Jesus is warning his disciples that they will have to face violence as they spread his word in this fallen world. But does he really mean we should pick up the sword? Or is it a metaphor for something else?

Bringing a Sword

This is not the only place where Jesus speaks about swords. In Matthew 10:34 he says,

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Historically, some Christians have used this verse to justify conflict in Christ's name. The Crusades are the classic example of this. Popes and European royalty wanted to control the trade routes to the Holy Land so they used Bible verses like this one to work the peasants into a religious frenzy.

But what did Jesus mean by all this sword talk? The short answer is that Jesus comes to bring peace between God and man. People who are united with God will be at peace with him and their fellow Christians. The problem is that by being united with God, they are now divided from people who reject God. Therefore, our peace with God causes conflict with the world.

So should Christians pick up the sword? That depends on the situation. In the case of a just war, it is honorable for Christians to serve as soldiers. Capital punishment is demanded by Scripture when someone is justly convicted of murder or another serious crime.

The fifth commandment is, "You shall not *murder*." It is not, "You shall not *kill*" although older translations will say it that way. Only murder is

² NIV Luke 22:36

prohibited by this commandment, not all forms of killing like you do when you are defending yourself or others. (There is a difference between the Hebrew verb to kill and the Hebrew verb to murder.)

The Sword of the Spirit

As Christians, however, our real warfare is spiritual. In that case, we use God's word as a verbal sword. As Paul writes,

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.³

Or as the author of Hebrews puts it:

...the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.⁴

Our "weapon" is God's word for all things pertaining to the faith. At no point should we wage a war to force people to convert. On the other hand, we may need to use physical force to defend our freedom to practice Christianity (and some would argue that is what they were doing in the Crusades but I won't take that debate up here.)

Put the Sword in the Sheath, Peter

In today's lesson, we see Jesus telling Peter to put his "sword into its sheath. All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."⁵

This verse is quoted often by pacifists who believe that Jesus is forbidding all warfare. The problem is that they take this verse out of context.

Because we are in Lent and you have heard this verse read in the context of Jesus' temptation in Gethsemane, you should have a general idea

³ NIV Ephesians 6:17

⁴ NIV Hebrews 4:12

⁵ Matthew 26:52

about why Jesus does not want to fight the Romans. He has just spent time in agonizing prayer trying to accept the Father's will. Jesus has made up his mind to hand himself over to the Romans knowing that he will be tortured and killed. If Peter were successful in freeing him, he will not be able to do his Father's will on the cross. Therefore, Jesus tells Peter to put his sword away.

When Jesus says, "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword," he is talking about those who wage war against legitimate authority. God had given the Romans the right to rule Judea and obedience to God demands that citizens obey the government under normal circumstances. (Yes, we can (and should) disobey the government if it tells us to kill all the Jews or do something that is clearly amoral.)

Because the Romans were the legitimate political authority at that time, Peter was committing rebellion by resisting arrest. In all fairness, he should have been punished for what he did (even if he was motivated by his love for Jesus). Peter was wrong on two accounts: distracting Jesus from the cross and rebelling against legitimate authority. Poor Peter never seems to get it right!

Put the Sword in the Sheath, Christian

As Christians, we all need to learn when to put the sword in the sheath. There is a time to stand up and fight. Christianity doesn't require us to be wimps or be "nice" all the time. On the hand, we need to choose our battles very carefully.

As I stated earlier, there are times when we need to resist the government. I am proud to say that the non-Jews who offered the most resistance to the Holocaust were Roman Catholic priests and Protestant pastors. But most of us will not find ourselves in that kind of situation.

I want to close by talking about a more subtle form of putting “the sword in the sheath.” It is putting the sword away in your daily life. We all experience battles in our daily life - little wars of words that go on between husband and wife, co-workers or classmates. We need to put away the sword in these little ways on a daily basis.

The next time you are in traffic, let the other person go first. The next time you are in an argument, let the other person win. The next time you have a memory of a past wrong, think about something else. Put the sword in the sheath.

Conclusion

As Christians, we are called to live peaceful and quiet lives. We are called to put away the sword – not always in a physical sense as Peter was called to do but in an interpersonal way in how we live with others. Throughout our lives, we must remind ourselves to put away the sword unless it is the sword of the Spirit. At the same time, we can be thankful that Christ did put away the sword. He did accept the sword that we deserved on the cross and he forgives us for all the times when we have failed to put it away.

*May that peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.*