

# Raising the Peacemaking Bar

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

Purpose: To demonstrate that the peace making of Jesus aspires to the highest standards of God's kingdom as a result being peacemakers sets us apart on a journey that will not necessarily win us friends.

There is no avoiding Jesus' words in today's gospel when he says, "Do not think that I come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." There are strong words – clear, definite words – and when we hear words like these from Jesus, we simply cannot set them to one side.

At first glance they seem challenging words. Actually they are challenging words! If this is what Jesus thinks, what does he make of the civil war in Syria and the deepening conflict in Iraq? Does this mean Jesus is comfortable with those religious conflicts that pit Christians against Muslims and Muslims against Christians?

They become even more challenging! I have come to set a son against his father and a daughter against her mother. So is Jesus promoting dysfunctional families now? Does this mean that Uniting Care Community Family Intervention services has got it wrong? Here they are working with families in their own home to help families develop better ways of communicating and overcoming conflict and striving to improve the safety and well-being of children and here's Jesus saying, "I came to divide with a sword."

So what are we to make of these challenging words? On this 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of a church that wishes to be Uniting, how are we to understand this swashbuckling messiah brandishing a sword?

Since they are such deeply confronting, challenging words it strange that today is the day that I want to tell you about my bicycle.

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I don't suppose that most of you know that I love to ride a bicycle. My bicycle is my pride and joy and while it's true that I haven't ridden my bicycle very much since I've come back to Brisbane, I've actually ridden a lot of kilometres by bicycle. Less than two years ago that I toured the South Coast of NSW with Anita by bicycle. That was 500kms or so I've toured the Atherton Tableland by bicycle. In 2003 I rode from Brisbane to Sydney carrying my food and water and my bicycle tools and my camping gear as I went.

It was a wonderful, unforgettable trip and I rode the whole way except for one bit. If you have ever driven the Lion's Road near Rathdowney you may know the bit I mean. Just before you cross the border on your way to see the Border Loop where the interstate trains chase their tails looping their way up the hill you travel up a short sharp hill. That's an 18% climb. For me on my bicycle that meant climbing around about my own height every nine metres. Let me tell you it was not easy going as I pedalled my way towards the dividing line that separates Queensland and NSW.

But it was worth it! I may have walked some of the way, but I made it. The view from the top looking out to the farms below was outstanding. And I think of that moment we I read this challenging passage where Jesus represents himself as a kind of boundary line. There are those who will stand for the things that I stand for and there are those who won't. There are those who will own their relationship with me and there are those who won't. Before my Father in heaven, Jesus says, I will not forget those folk who know me and value the things I stand for. I am the great divide. You are entering new territory when you travel into the future with me.

If we are to make sense of this challenging passage this morning, we need to understand that.

Jesus stands for something. Especially in Matthew's gospel, the gospel of the Sermon of the Mount, we know that Jesus stands for something.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” he said back then. The reconciliation that he offers is not a cheap reconciliation.

In this world we drop the price if we want to sell more tickets.

To attract the crowds we make the entry point easier. That’s the rule of supply and demand, but that’s not the rule in God’s kingdom. Jesus stands for something and he sets the highest possible standards. He is the dividing line.

We need to understand that if we are to make sense of this challenging passage. The peace of Jesus is not a cheap peace. The peace of Jesus is not a lowest common denominator, all- things-to-all-people kind of peace. It’s not that this passage is running contrary to the idea of the healing, peacemaking, reconciling ministry of Jesus. It’s more that Jesus is raising the bar for that ministry.

Don’t think that you can get away with anything and everything, Jesus is effectively saying. There are standards that we aspire to if we follow in the healing, peacemaking, reconciling ministry of Jesus. And when you stand firm for those values, not everyone is going to stand with you. That’s the division of this challenging passage from the gospel today. Jesus is the sword that cuts through right and wrong, good and evil, justice and injustice.

And there’s a warning. Don’t think it’s going to be easy. Stand with me. Stand for the things I stand for and there are folks in this world who are going to run a mile and maybe your best friends and some members of your family are going to be amongst them.

It’s not that Jesus stands against his own peacemaking, reconciling ministry in this passage. Rather he sets out the cost of it. If anything he raises the bar on what peace-making is all about.

Keeping the peace is not just giving in when others challenge the standards of God’s kingdom. Keeping the peace is not lowering our Christian standards or setting our Christian values to one side for a more comfortable life. To the contrary keeping the peace can be about as challenging as pedalling your bicycle up an 18% incline.

And on the occasion of this Uniting Church Anniversary I want to say that being peacemakers for the Kingdom of God is not easy work. Claiming a vision for the unity of the body of Christ and making that vision the centre of who we are and what we are called to be may not make us the most fashionable church around. But it is God's work and being popular and fashionable is not first and foremost what we are on about.

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I am thinking today of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Some of us will know the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It would be good if all of us knew the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and maybe we do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the devout Christian thinker who plotted to kill Hitler. He was a Lutheran Pastor who paid price when he was arrested by the Gestapo in April 1943. He was imprisoned until April 9, 1945, just two weeks before Allied forces liberated the camp and three weeks before Hitler's suicide. That day he was executed by hanging.

I think today of Dietrich Bonhoeffer because I'm not sure that I could have done what he did. I'm not sure that I could have made that decision that he did to put his life on the line.

He certainly wasn't a pacifist, but I think I see in him something of the healing, peacemaking reconciling ministry of Jesus. He certainly didn't stand for a cheap peace, the kind of peace where folk just give in to their protagonists. It certainly wasn't a lowest common denominator peace. I think the sword of which Jesus speaks in today's gospel hovers all over the Dietrich Bonhoeffer story.

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I believe that in the Uniting Church in Australia we are called to be something. I believe that we are called to aspire to the highest standards of justice in the realm in which God reigns. I believe that the loving communion of the Trinity about which we spoke last week sets the pinnacle of those high standards. I believe that when we call

ourselves “Uniting”, it is that loving communion of the Trinity to which in Christ we are drawn and to which we aspire.

But aspiration isn’t enough. This is a vocation to which God calls us. We are to be Uniting. Not easy. Not popular. Not fashionable. Not lowest common denominator, easy-come- easy-go, everything and anything is acceptable Christianity.

This is a unity that we must work hard to achieve. This is costly peacemaking – the principled peace of the Kingdom of God. And some folk will run a mile from that challenge.

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“Those who do not take up their cross and follow me are not worthy of me,” Jesus says in the last verses of the gospel for today. And he continues, “Those who find their life will lose it, those who lose their lives for my sake will find it.”

On this 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Uniting Church, let us lose ourselves into the healing, peacemaking, reconciling ministry of Jesus. Let us find ourselves in the swashbuckling messiah who cuts through the injustices of this world and offers in eternity the deepest, lingering peace.