

I know Fathers' day is just out of the way and I don't want to spoil your tan-topping Pimms-sipping barbecue burning sun drenched summer mood, but ever the slave to duty, I think it is my obligation as the minister of the established church here this morning to point out that we are pretty much today at the half way mark and there are only 183 days till Christmas. Yep, from now on in it's downhill all the way. Only 183 days or fewer before the quantitative easing we can all join in kicks in, scarce half a year till that orgy of capitalist consumption, extreme exhaustion, saccharine sentimentality, dying pine trees, panic buying, over eating, card listing, posting and forgetting, school carol concerts and Midnight mass coughing fits. Sorry. Hey, but at least the sun's still shining. Ah yes, I forgot to add 'family get togethers' to the end of that list. Oh, look, now the sun's gone in as well. What power mere words have.

I'm sure you think it is mighty weird for me to be talking about Christmas just as we're getting some serious summer. Though possibly no more weird than the sermons usual are. But, you know, it might be weird in this way today because for clergy everyday is Christmas, but actually that place of Yuletide eternity comes the other side of death: the place where every day is Christmas is, of course, a special part of purgatory reserved for priests, Away in a Manger in minor seconds looped for ever.

Another possibility is that I have become over-anxious on your behalf that you give yourself plenty of time to get on top of the seasonal stuff. Not because of the goodness of my heart- you might be waiting quite some time till that kicks in- but with the subconscious motive that the more you're ahead of the game the more likely you are to come to church.

Anyway, I really am avoiding getting to the point this morning: it's almost too hot to bother. However, here goes. What has got me reaching for the santa hat this summer's morning is being the owner of a twisted mind that saw the gospel reading set for today and immediately thought 'Christmas.' I know there's no shepherds, no inn, no wise men, no camel, no donkey and Jesus is very definitely no longer little Baby.

For many, many people in our post-Christian country the closest they will ever get to Christ is Christmas, a bittersweet irony as up and down the country year in, year out, it is the one time of the

year millions of us enact entirely unconsciously one of Jesus's most vivid, disturbing glossed over and generally ignored teachings. We heard that teaching read today:

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

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

If that isn't a description of Boxing day afternoon behind the net curtains of a million UK homes, I don't know what is.

There is, I hope you are expecting me to say, a bit more to be said about this than just a lame joke to start a sermon about seasonal domestic discord. It is a stark, scary teaching that sounds like it could only really be loved by a DUP MP, but given the rule of thumb among serious Bible students that the more difficult a saying of Jesus's is, the more likely it is to be 100% authentic, I think we need to resist the strong temptation to say to ourselves 'move on now; nothing to see here'. We need to grit our teeth, gird our loins (I'm not sure quite what that means, but you get the idea) and make ourselves look long and hard at what wisdom our saviour is wishing to impart here.

The very first thing we can say, just to get it out of the way, is that Jesus is not suggesting here that family feuding and spats with your in-laws is a good thing, something to be sought after and desired. It's true that Jesus' view of the family is a lot less sentimental and restrictive than subsequent church teaching has sought to imply: but that's another sermon. However, given the emphasis elsewhere in the gospels on being reconciled to those who have wronged you, praying for those who persecute you, loving your enemies etc. we can be confident that it is not the case that he thinks its a good thing to keep up the vendetta with Auntie Vi or take a cudgel to your particularly annoying cousin.

The nightmarish vision of a family turning against itself is being used by Jesus to illustrate just how radical following him might actually be, just how shattering to the status quo his teaching potentially is, just how revolutionary the results could be. The blade

of the sword Jesus will wield is whetted on the wheel of the Word, sharp enough to sever the strongest of human attachments, to cut through even the densest of human institutions.

The second thing we can say, categorically, is that Jesus is not here inviting us to go and finish off people who are not Christian, or people who are Christian but the wrong sort of Christian or people who say they are Christian but are nothing of the kind. We are not being invited to prosecute holy war, we are not being encouraged to set forth on a crusade against unbelievers, we are not being invited to root out heretics and drag them to the scaffold. 'Blessed are the peacemakers'; 'Turn the other cheek'; 'Go the extra mile' 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.' 'Do not resist an evildoer.' 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. That is not a manifesto for holy war.

The sword Jesus promises then is not a literal one: of that we can be quite clear. But that he comes to bring a sword, we can be certain. Where then, will that sword fall?

Jesus brings the sword to a world where women are second class citizens at best, more commonly mere chattel of their husbands; a world where one human being can own another; a world where children without rights are exploited, abused and neglected; where the displaced and desperate are demonised and criminalised; where the disabled, diseased and different are pushed to the margins, forced into abject poverty to wait at the rich man's gates so they can beg from their betters; where some grow fat from the forced labour of others; where the law is a possession of those who own and justice denied to those who do not; where boys and girls are murdered in parks and at bus stops because they have a different racial, ethnic or religious background; where it is more important for housing for the poorest to look pretty than to be safe; the world where fear is everywhere and the only god is the golden idol of greed.

That is a scary world indeed, and it is to that world that Jesus brings the sword.

It seems, Christian soldiers, that we have do have a fight on our hands after all. But ours is not a battle for glory, for territory, for empire, king and country, to defeat our enemies and enslave our

foes. Ours is the battle for justice, for truth, for mercy, for the weakest and meekest of our brothers and sisters, for the unwanted and the unloved.

Our aims are not to kill, to dominate, to subjugate and to conquer; our aims are to welcome and to sustain, to forgive and to love.

And what drives us on? What gives us hope? It is that Christmas promise of God made man transported to Good Friday dying on the cross, taking all humanity can throw at him. And still, still refusing to hate. And still, still responding with love.

*Fr Andrew Fenby 2017*