

John Docherty, November 27, 2016

Swords into ploughshares

The theme for this advent season is “Walking in the way of God's heart”. The Leader magazine suggests a series of meditations that look at the various aspects of what “the way of God's heart” means :

the way of peace,

the way of harmony,

the way of healing,

the way of restoration.

The theme, then, for this Sunday is “God's peace is at hand”, and the scriptures that were read (Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44) are intended to speak to that reality.

Both scriptures are looking forward to the arrival of God's peace, and, in that respect at least, they fit into the advent time of waiting, of anticipation. They're scriptures that speak of what it yet to come, and are intended, on this Sunday at least, to be read in the context of the time of waiting for the birth of a child who will bring salvation to the nations.

But I think it's fair to say that they also anticipate the ultimate realization of the various themes. In other words, *we're on the way* to peace – we're not quite there yet.

we're on the way to harmony

we're on the way to healing

we're on the way to restoration

The Isaiah passage is perhaps a little more obviously linked to the theme of peace than is the Matthew passage. Isaiah speaks of beating swords into ploughshares; of nations no longer learning the art of war; while Matthew speaks of Christ's return and the uncertain timing around *that* event.

I'm sure the Isaiah passage is one of the more familiar passages from the Old Testament, especially among Mennonites. It's a vivid image of transformation and radical rejection of the ways of the past.

It's also quite out of step with most of the rest of the Old Testament.

If you do a search of the word “sword” you'll find almost 400 occasions when the word is used in the New Revised Standard Version. And, as you might expect, in about 400 of those instances it's used in a far less positive sense.

Much of the time, the swords mentioned are literal swords that are being used to slaughter and maim.

Whether it's the Israelites who are taking the lives of their enemies, or their enemies who are taking the lives of the Israelites, the swords of the Old Testament are fearful symbols of the struggle for legitimacy or simple survival.

In the prophets alone, you'll find fully half of the references to swords, and, as often as not, the swords in question are being used, or are being threatened, against the people of Israel.

Sometimes, the sword itself is the “sword of the Lord”, an instrument of punishment for misdeeds or unfaithfulness.

The Old Testament is not, generally speaking, a comfortable foreshadowing picture of an idealistic future of peace and harmony brought about by a caring and peace-loving God.

It's an earthy, often stark, picture of a flawed humanity trying desperately to get it right.

There are inspirational exceptions, of course, and this passage from Isaiah is one of them. It's an expression of faith that the day *will* come when the nations will end their constant bickering.

And it's a poetic and metaphoric expression of that hope:

“In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.”

There are other expressions of this kind of hope.

Take Micah, for example. You remember Micah : “... and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

That's another passage, well beloved by Mennonites and other Christians. Well, Micah shares Isaiah's expectation of this kind of future.

In Micah chapter 4, we read :

“In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
and many nations shall come and say:
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more ...”

Hmm ... I think we have a little case of prophetic plagiarism going on here.

Mind you, Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries, both active around 750 BC, so I suppose a bit of mutual admiration might have been par for the course ... a little bit like the admiration of Melania Trump for Michelle Obama ...

Well, maybe that's not the best example.

Let's just say that Micah and Isaiah share a common concern for questions of justice, and a common conviction that as justice is realized God will indeed eventually bring about a society in which war and weapons are no longer needed, or even desired.

But the uncomfortable thing is that not all of the Old Testament prophets seem to share quite the same vision of how God will ultimately resolve the strife existing between the nations and peoples.

The vision of Isaiah and Micah is that the nations will come to the mountain of the Lord and abandon once and for all their weapons of destruction.

The vision of the prophet Joel, on the other hand, writing maybe 50 or 60 years after Isaiah and Micah, is quite different. Joel has this to say about God's plan for humanity in chapter 2 of his writings :

“Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”

So he has his inspiring images, too. But Joel also has this to say, in chapter 3 :

“Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up. Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning-hooks into spears; let the weakling say, ‘I am a warrior.’”

He then goes on to describe the destruction of the nations for their treatment of Israel, with phrases like “... put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great ...”, “... the Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake.”

It's not a pleasant picture, and it's not the peaceful picture of Micah and Isaiah.

So how are we to reconcile these visions of what's in store?

I suppose one could argue that they're not mutually exclusive visions : one could read it as the nations being beaten down until they finally recognize the futility of their actions and beat their own swords and ploughshares into more constructive tools.

One could argue that they're also only incomplete visions of God's intended actions towards humanity, and that we don't get a proper glimpse of God's heart for peace until Jesus comes to show us the way.

But if you'll permit me to indulge in a little personal plagiarism of my own, I'd like to draw on a meditation I brought here at MFM a few years ago.

The Lectionary reading on that occasion was from John 14 :

“... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives ...”

I then tried to explore how Jesus' peace differs from the peace offered by the world.

In that earlier meditation I commented that Jesus also has something to say about peace in Matthew's gospel, and he puts quite a different spin on things :

Matthew 10.34-39 “ ‘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. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and 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.”

I suggested that I didn't find that very comforting.

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

In that earlier message I suggested that one way to read this passage is to view it as a call to engage in direct confrontation in an effort to bring healthy resolution to conflict.

As I grappled with the passage, I wondered : “What is the nature of this sword that he's brought? Is it only, or even primarily, a weapon of destruction and strife, or is it a tool for forcing engagement? Is it something that forces people apart, leaving only blood and gore on the pavement, or is it something that forces people to struggle with each other and seek justice rather than passively suffering hurt and exclusion?”

By way of a partial answer to those questions, I looked at another passage from Matthew's gospel.

Chapter 5: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

I think that passage goes a long way in explaining how we are to wield that sword that Jesus brings : we are to use it to attack conflict and injustice head on. We are called to acknowledge that we are sometimes hurt, and have a right to seek justice for that hurt.

But the passage I just read underlines that we are called to acknowledge that we are also sometimes hurtful. That we are not to seek God's forgiveness in the dark, anonymous secrecy of the priestly confessional, but in the open forgiving arms of those we have hurt.

We're called to make this work.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again ... relationships matter, and we are not free to walk away from interpersonal conflict. We are called to grapple with how we treat each other, and to make things right when we are responsible for broken relationships.

And in the light of the passages from Isaiah and Micah, let me try to approach the Matthew passage from a slightly different angle this time.

It may not be the sword that Jesus speaks of, but it strikes me that we all have an armoury of weaponry that we carry with us; weaponry that we sometimes use against each other.

We are, all of us, flawed human beings who have our own personal baggage. We may not be inherently violent individuals, but I think it is fair to say that we all have patterns of behaviour that can sometimes be unhealthy, and sometimes outright hurtful.

Whether it's a tendency towards direct anger or lashing out at others, either physically or verbally, or a tendency towards more passive-aggressive styles of confrontation, we have our ways of using our power against those we feel threatened by.

We can shun others; we can undermine their position; we can spout hurtful things about them in gossip or in confrontation; we can go out of our way to make things difficult for them; we can bring any number of weapons to bear if we feel like we have been slighted somehow.

For those of us who feel we have very little power, this weaponry may feel more protective than aggressive; more defensive than offensive. Our decision to ignore or avoid certain people, for example, may be perfectly reasonable if we are at risk of harm by engaging with that person.

But the fact remains that all of these weapons serve to alienate us one from the other;

they are weapons, and destroy the potential for positive relationships rather than offering a way towards healthy interaction.

And while Isaiah and Micah's poetic image of swords being beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks is clearly intended to be applied to the nations of the world, I wonder whether there is something there for us on a personal level.

Which of your swords need to be beaten into ploughshares; tools for positive engagement?

Which of your spears can be transformed into pruning hooks; tools for constructive action?

How can you bring all those passions and energies and sometimes unhealthy impulses to the surface and use them in ways that respect the fact that we are called to walk in the way of God's peace?