

Peace?

The Colt Single Action Army Model P M1875 was designed for the U.S. government service revolver trials of 1872 by Colt's Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company and was adopted as the standard-issued revolver of the U.S. Army from 1873 to 1892.

The revolver was historically popular with soldiers, ranchers, lawmen, and outlaws and it has become an icon of the American Wild West. It is famously known as 'the Peacemaker'.

Peacemaker may seem an ironic name for a gun, and no one is exactly sure when or how the nickname came about, but it does seem that this gun did bring a sort of peace to the lawless frontier.

Even today, of course, guns and other instruments of war are frequently used to make and keep peace. Or at least a form of peace. That is often a hard thing for us as Christians to come to grips with. It seems that such peacekeeping efforts can be and are mostly successful, but often they're not.

But what do we mean by 'peace' anyway? Is it enough to separate warring factions? Is it enough to stop people fighting? Is it enough to disarm people?

And if not at gunpoint, how could we ever achieve peace?

Well, Luke 2:14 tells us of the angel announcing Jesus' birth, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men", and we know from Isaiah's prophecy that the son given to us will be called Prince of Peace.

It might seem, therefore, that Jesus brings peace... but the better translation of Luke 2:14 is "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

And also, as we heard in our reading from Matthew's gospel today, Jesus said, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (10:34)

Ponder that for a moment – Jesus said, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword".

That's not the sort of thing we expect Jesus to say, is it? We expect words of comfort and assurance and hope.

In fact, what Jesus says here seems to go against what most Christians would say Jesus was about. Or in fact, what most people would say Jesus was about.

Not peace, but a sword... does that disturb you? Does it challenge you?

We know Jesus often challenged people – he told them things that disturbed them.

We can often dismiss Jesus' challenges because they were directed at the scribes pharisees and the teachers of the law, or the very wealthy, and we're not like them, clearly... or at least we can claim not to be like them.

But Jesus not coming to bring peace, but a sword, challenges us all, because it doesn't fit with the image of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild", that we often have.

We know Jesus as the Prince of Peace, and yet here he says, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Blessed are the peacemakers and all that. The gospels portray Jesus as a bringer of peace, and Jesus' teaching bears that out.

But – and it's a big but – Jesus says here is that his peace is not peace as the world understands it. It's not the sheriff in his white hat riding into town with his Colt Peacemaker. Nor is it not simply the absence of

fighting between people. It's not simply the separation of warring factions. It's not people being made to grudgingly accept things they're not happy with.

So, what is the peace that Jesus brings?

The peace that Jesus brings is peace between God and people – between God and us. The peace that Jesus came to bring is salvation. It's reconciliation with God.

The effect of that peace is peace among people, but we can't have that without Jesus being involved.

And for people to receive Jesus' peace, they need to accept Jesus. Those that reject Jesus don't have peace.

The sword that Jesus brings isn't to make peace at sword point, but it divides, it separates. People who are with Jesus on one side, people who aren't on the other. People are either on one side of the division or the other – there's no middle ground.

Paul sets it out clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he says (and I hope you'll forgive me for quoting 1 Corinthians 1:18 yet again) "...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Corinthians 1:18)– because on the face of it, the message of the cross is crazy – that an all-powerful God, would give up his only son to die for sinful people. But if we have that spark of faith, Paul says "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God".

As a result, people will always be divided. Those who think the gospel, the message of the cross is foolishness on one hand, and those of us who know it as the power of God on the other.

As Jesus said in verse 32 and 33 of today's reading: "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."

Acknowledging Jesus – following Jesus – is a choice for us: his grace is there for every one of us – indeed for all of us, but we each make our own choice. And that choice has a consequence: That choice determines what side of the sword – what side of the division – we're on.

As we continue in today's gospel reading, Jesus describes the extent of the division: For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man's enemies will be the members of his own household." (10:35-36)

He's telling us about a change in the order of things – the way the nation of Israel at the time viewed their relationship with God.

The nation of Israel, we know from the Old Testament, were God's chosen people. The promises made to Abraham – father Abraham – in Genesis, and summed up in Exodus 6:7 "I will make you my own people, and I will be your God."

For the Jewish people of Jesus' time, it was a matter of claiming that inheritance. They believed they were 'right with God' because they were descendants of Abraham. But over time they'd become arrogant in that knowledge: God was their God, and God would look after them. They were either forgetting - or ignoring - the parts of the promises to Abraham that said the whole world would be blessed through them.

By the time of Jesus teaching though, they'd already had John the Baptist's preaching which warned them about this. You might remember it from Luke 3, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [...] Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham!" (Luke 3:7-8)

And here, Jesus warns that families would be divided: Fathers against sons. Mothers against daughters. And so on. Divided by the metaphorical sword. The traditional nation of Israel against the followers of Jesus.

Those that accept Jesus. And those who don't.

When we think about our relationship with God, it is just that, and that only that counts. Do we trust Jesus? Do we put our belief and faith and hope in him? Or do we not? Do we believe that he died and rose again for us? Or do we not?

It doesn't matter how long you've been going to church for, or which church you go to, or how many times a week you go to church, or how much you put in the offertory or whether you've been baptised or confirmed, or whether you're on every roster. (Don't get me wrong – all those things are good things to do, but the key is: do we put our faith in Jesus?).

So that was a huge change for the people of the time to come to grips with. A change that John the Baptist preached, and Jesus confirms here. It's not a change in what God intended; and neither is it a change in what God promised: What Jesus - and John before him - taught was the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

They should have known. They had the Old Testament. They read the scrolls of the law and the prophets regularly (even if selectively), they sang the psalms together. They should have known.

The signs were all there.

We shouldn't be too harsh on them, though, because it's much easier for us to see: We know the whole story, and we have the Holy Spirit who helps us understand.

But even so.... They should have known.

And I think it can easily be the same for us.

There are things that we should know, but we don't always get them right. We can convince ourselves about the rightness of what we do and how we do it. We can boast in coming to church and giving and reading the scriptures and praying... we can be 'good' followers of Jesus, like those ancient people we 'good' followers of the law.

But are our hearts changed? Are our lives being changed because of our faith in Jesus? Is our church being changed by our faith in Jesus? Is our world being changed by our faith in Jesus? Because they should be.

There are things we should know, but we don't always get them right. We regularly confess our sins, and we are regularly reminded of God's forgiveness, aren't we? But how often do we find those sins continuing to weigh on us?

And so it is with the peace that Jesus came to bring. True peace. Reconciliation between God and people. But so often we dumb that down to the world's version of peace, something warm and fuzzy, where what is wrong with the world is simply ignored or glossed over.

But the peace Jesus came to bring does something about what is wrong. And that is God's judgement. Ultimately things can't be made right without doing something about what is wrong.

We know that Jesus' presence was divisive two thousand years ago. And we can see that Jesus' presence is still divisive today. It is not Jesus' purpose to disturb the peace, to cause division, but it is the result of how people response to him.

For Jesus - and for his followers then and now - peace is not merely the absence of conflict, because we can still be at peace with God, amidst great conflict in our lives and in our world. Peace is not a truce or a period of quiet or not talking to others. Peace is the presence of God, even amidst all the noise and tension conflict brings.

That peace is there for us all, in the face of all the problems and trials of our lives.

Our challenge then, is to put our faith in Jesus, and to discern Jesus' way in the world. To remember that in this age there will always be division, not peace, in this world, division between those who accept Jesus, and those who reject him.

In verse 37 we heard that Jesus said, "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." And that doesn't sit well with our society, where it seems that the love of our children is the most important thing there is. But here, Jesus says, no, you need to love me more. If you think about it, he's really just restating the great and first commandment ... "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind and with all your spirit".

It doesn't mean that you don't love your child, because love isn't something limited that needs to be rationed out.

Jesus warns us that the Christian journey will be – at least sometimes – hard going.

"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (10:38) God's plan is that all people should be saved, but people need to respond to the grace of God shown in Jesus.

And similarly, "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for [his] sake will find it." (10:39)

Jesus warned that those who choose to follow him in life will have trouble relating to those who did not so choose. The result of being a Christian is that we stand in opposition to many of the values and practices favoured by the world around us, and there is always a price to pay for standing on principle. Jesus paid it with his life. But in doing that, he opened the way to true and everlasting peace, for each one of us, and for all who turn to him in faith.

Amen.