

St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 21st June 2026

(Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)

Genesis 21:8–21; Romans 6:1–11; Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17; Matthew 10:24–39

I. Today's gospel reading is a strange group of Jesus' sayings. All of it continues the theme of mission which we saw last week. But there are words of our Lord that are unexpected and we might find difficult: harsh words, stern warnings, strange requirements.

There is of course one lovely saying about how much God cares for each one of us, and how much God is attentive to us: even counting the hairs of our head!

But it's in uneasy company. 'Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword!' Is that really Jesus the Prince of Peace speaking? And isn't the good news all about peace and reconciliation: peace on earth and good will towards all? And why are disciples asked not to love their father and mother too much? Especially given that the Fourth Commandment tells us, 'Honour your father and mother'.

II. So what about the sword instead of peace? Well, Jesus' ultimate message *is* about making of peace: 'Blessed are the peacemakers', Jesus says earlier in the same Gospel. But Jesus' point in our passage today is that the path to peace will inevitably lead us into conflict. He's saying that peace isn't enough. True peace always comes with justice and with truth. There can't be real peace with one another, there can't be peace among warring factions or nations, unless there's confession of wrongs, unless there's truth-telling.

Jesus is warning us here that the very act of upholding of goodness and love and truth might lead to hostility. Being on God's side is not always the easier side to be on. Because it means sometimes proclaiming from the rooftops what's been hidden in the darkness. Look at the Epstein files: an example of the need to proclaim in the light what's been concealed in the dark, the secret evils that've been inflicted on children by powerful people.

Jesus has come to bring peace, yes, but that peace-making is often accompanied by conflict. Not everyone wants Christ's peace because it also demands truth and justice.

III. So what about our attitude to our parents? Jesus is making a very simple point. Jesus is talking about what's at the core of our lives, what our true priorities are. We're not to love anyone more than we love God. That comes first, even before love of our parents.

And there's wisdom in this. If we love people more than God — that is with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength — the danger is we turn them into idols; in effect we've begun to worship them. And that's a terrible burden to place on anyone. It means we can never let them go, we can never let them be themselves. We end up always having to control them.

Of course we're called to love our neighbours, including the members of our families and our parents, but this love needs to have its proper place. God is the only one who demands all our hearts' devotion: 'You shall have no other gods before me.' Love of neighbour – love of our father and mother – follows after love of God.

It's about getting the centre right and when the centre is right then everything else can fall into place. Love has found its true voice. We can then love others in a way that sets them free, that allows them to be themselves because we love God first and foremost. We have the freedom to love and, when necessary, to let go. We haven't turned them into idols. And the same goes for our possessions or our level of education or our achievements or wealth anything else about ourselves. In the end we need to let these things go and not cling to them.

Anthony de Mello has a meditation where we're invited to go through everyone and everything in our lives — those dear to us and those things we prize, including our own health — and to say to each one, 'I love you but you are not my life.' Finally we turn to Christ and to him and him alone we say, 'I love you and you are my life.'

There's only one being we give our hearts' full devotion to and that is God, the God who loves us and who attends to us and who can even count the hairs on our heads: the God who knows our worries, our fears, our longings; the God who never lets us go but stays with us in thick and thin, in life and in death.

IV. That's the God we meet in our Old Testament reading in the story of Sarah and Hagar. It's a story about conflict, about jealousy, about exclusion. There's no possibility here of peace in this situation. Hagar with her son has to go. The power of the rich over the poor has asserted itself: Hagar is a slave and Sarah is her mistress, on this occasion being harsh and excluding. The story doesn't affirm Sarah in what she does; on the contrary.

But God cares for Hagar. Even though in the terms of her world she has no status or power, God comes to her and her child in their distress. God is with her in banishment and exile; he rescues them in the desert and establishes security for them both. That's a good example of the sword present in the family and yet God's continuing care, especially for the powerless and excluded.

And that goes for our attitude towards others too. The poor, the needy, the excluded, the disabled: they are to have a special place in our mission as they have in God's. And that extends also to ourselves — to the most vulnerable and needy parts of our own hearts that we often find difficult and yet that God especially loves.

V. Today's readings remind us again of the loving and yet challenging nature of our God and what it means to be called as his Jesus' disciples for our mission in the world.

Thanks be to God.

Mthr Dorothy