

# Prince of Peace, or Enemy of the Peace?

*A sermon on Matthew 10.24-39 by Nathan Nettleton, 25 June 2023*

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## Message

Jesus did not come with the goal of making some gentle improvements to the status quo, but to disable the status quo by exposing its lies and revealing its victims. Without our culture being radically converted by that, the result is escalating chaos, to which Jesus offers himself as a victim and calls us to do the same.

## Sermon

I was talking to our friend, indigenous theologian Garry Deverell, a few months back about how to make sense of the divisions in the Aboriginal community over the Voice referendum. I was particularly keen to hear his take on how Senator Lydia Thorpe was viewed in the community. He explained something to me that seemed obvious once it was pointed out, but I'd never thought of it before.

He said that usually, important social change is achieved by an uneasy coalition of two types of activists. One type are the Lydia Thorpes, who chain themselves to trees, deface priceless artworks, lie down in front of trucks, refuse all compromise, scream impossible demands at us, and offend people right, left, and centre. The other type are the patient sensible negotiators who are willing to compromise and bargain and work out realistic programs of incremental change. But, he said, that second group probably wouldn't have even been invited to the table unless the likes of Lydia were making them look like the lesser of two evils.

I'm betting that the majority of us gathered here share a greater affinity with the sensible realistic negotiators, but we are here as followers of Jesus, and in tonight's gospel reading, we heard Jesus in full-on Lydia Thorpe mode. While Jesus tended to be gentle and sensitive and patient with individuals, when he was looking at the big picture and addressing the sin and brokenness of our world, our culture, our social structures, he tended to go the full Lydia, and it doesn't make for comfortable listening.

In the passage we heard tonight, Jesus runs the full gamut. He said lovely gentle comforting things like "not even a sparrow falls to the ground without God caring, and even the hairs on your head are counted, so do not be afraid." But then he turns his attention to the big picture and speaks of a spiral into global violence, saying, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

This statement offends us mightily for at least two different reasons. Firstly, we quickly recognise its appeal to violent religious extremists such as the three who ambushed and murdered two police officers and a neighbour in Queensland earlier in the year.

But secondly it offends us because it seems so utterly contradictory. We like to think of ourselves as peace-loving people, and we are fond of celebrating Jesus as the "Prince of Peace", but here he is telling us outright that he has not come to bring peace, but to unleash violence; to turn even family members against one another. How can Jesus say that when elsewhere he says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you"? Does he actually know what he's doing, or doesn't he?

Well, there may be a clue in that second quote, because the bible nerds among you will know that I cut it short. What he really says is, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not the kind of peace the world gives, but my kind of peace.” (John 14:27)

In his quest for a new and better way of creating peace, Jesus is first going the full Lydia and deliberately kicking out the foundations from under our old ways. And if you demolish the old ways of making peace without everyone embracing a new and better way, the first consequence will be a breakdown of peace, an outbreak of violent chaos, and a real danger of it escalating out of control.

Today’s world seems no closer to embracing Jesus’s alternative kind of peace, and every time we turn on the news, we can’t help but wonder whether the apocalypse Jesus forewarned isn’t upon us. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

This concept of Jesus kicking out the foundations from under our previous ways of establishing and maintaining peace may be new to many of you, so let me explain. I am completely indebted for this to the anthropological and cultural analysis of the French theorist, René Girard.

Girard showed us that one of the problems with evangelical Christian theology is that we have talked a lot about Jesus as the saviour of the world, without developing any clear sense of what it is that the world needs to be saved from. As a result, we’ve ended up turning the saviour of the world into merely the saviour of individual souls.

So Girard focussed his attention on trying to understand what was wrong with the world, and he recognised that the way we conventionally maintain peace is at the heart of the world’s original sin. We don’t build the peace that Jesus gives; we construct a false, even demonic peace, and in the face of that, Jesus thunders, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

What we have become accustomed to thinking of as peace is not really peace at all, it is merely stability. Stability feels like peace when we are benefitting from it, but it is not really peace because it is utterly unjust, it has victims. There are always people whose welfare, interests, rights, or even lives are sacrificed in the cause of securing this stability, and we can only kid ourselves that it is peace by erasing any awareness or understanding of the victims, and of our complicity in the violence they suffer.

We do that in two main ways. One is simply segregation. We live among nice people in nice neighbourhoods in nice countries, and we use housing prices and social policy and border controls to ensure that we mostly never even have to see the victims, let alone hear and absorb their stories.

The second is that we construct mythologies, religious or otherwise, which explain the hierarchy of winners and losers as some kind of divinely mandated natural order. Some of you will remember the heretical verse that appeared in older versions of a favourite hymn:

*The rich man in his castle,  
the poor man at his gate;*

*God made the poor and lowly,  
and ordered their estate.*

You greatly reduce the risk of violent revolution if you promulgate a mythology that persuades the poor that there is no reason to resent the rich because this is the God-given natural order of creation, and everyone will be happiest if they accept their God-given place and live out their prescribed role. Most of us who are the beneficiaries are not consciously creating this fiction, we are simply maintaining the status quo, as we have received it and always understood it.

Most of us did not personally think up the myths and lies that have enabled generations of us to live comfortably on stolen lands and erase from memory the horrific massacres that secured those lands for us. What we experience as peace is merely stability, maintained by sacrificing the rights, lands and lives of Indigenous communities.

The men in gathered here did not create the mythology that said that women were inferior to men and should be subservient to men because God says so, but as long as that myth was unquestioningly accepted, we certainly benefitted from it, and often continue to do so. As long as even the women believed it, things remained orderly and stable. “Peaceful.” But it wasn’t real peace because it was based on a lie, an injustice, the sacrifice of women’s dignity and opportunity.

Over and over, “the peace the world gives” was created and maintained by sacrificing the needs of someone else. And if anyone rebelled against being kept in their place, more often than not we literally scapegoated and killed them. Nothing produced a greater euphoric sense of unity, righteousness, and peace than the holy fury of the lynch mob purging the community of the alleged witch or heretic or lunatic or traitor who was unanimously accused of causing whatever conflict, breakdown and chaos were threatening us.

But the peace that Jesus comes to bring is not the peace the world gives. Jesus resisted and denounced the social mythologies that subjugated people and kept them in their place. He exposed them for the lies they are. He championed the dignity and rights of those we had sacrificed. And how did that go? What happened? A sword, that’s what.

What happened was what always happened. If you challenge and threaten the stability that we call peace, it won’t be long before there is a lynch mob chanting “Crucify, Crucify.” And it is mighty dangerous to refuse to join a lynch mob, because once its blood is up, it will quickly turn on anyone who is not on its side. When the lynching is over, we are all sucked in by the euphoria of that demonic unanimity, which masquerades as the divine restoration of peace.

But something new began with the Hebrew prophets and reached its climax in Jesus and has continued to grow in influence ever since. That new thing was an unprecedented religious honouring of the voice of the victims, which of course challenged the mythologies of the winners that had always said that this orderly sacrificing of some was God-given, sacred, and unquestionable. When we crucified Jesus, it became impossible to un-see the truth of that critique. We had just lynched the most obviously righteous and utterly loving and merciful person in the history of the world.

Lest there be any doubt, God raised him from the dead, and he reached out to us with wounded hands that clearly identified him with the long line of our victims, but he reached out without even the slightest hint of vengefulness or threat of retaliation. Full of mercy, he breathed his peace onto us.

But here's the thing, and this is where Jesus says he has not come to bring peace, but a sword.

By his words and actions and his death as one of our sacrificial victims, Jesus completely unmasked the lies upon which human culture has always constructed the stability it calls peace. In effect he poisoned the system, and it has been slowly dying ever since as we become more and more aware of our victims. Once you know that you are scapegoating and sacrificing innocent people, you can't un-see it, and you can no longer achieve the unanimity required to make it work. It only worked when we all believed it. So now, more and more often, the only way we knew to create "peace" doesn't work. We have lost our means of preventing conflict from escalating out of control.

For example, the widespread acceptance of the equality of the sexes in recent decades has not reduced conflict between the sexes, because when the lies that silenced and subjugated women are exposed as lies, the gloves come off. The more equal we are, the more prone to standing up to one another we become.

This is what Jesus was saying with that stuff about setting a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and your foes will be members of your own household. The unity of the household, whether it be the family unit or the household of faith, used to be easily secured. Us was us, and us could easily be united over against them, but once we are deprived of the means of doing that, "us" breaks down, and hostilities, having lost their customary safety valve, begin to tear even "us" apart. The Russians have been giving themselves a lesson in that in the past couple of days.

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Jesus has deprived the world of the only way it knew to create and maintain "peace". The growing recognition of our victims has now got to the point of producing an all-in fight over who is biggest victim of all. Never before in history was being seen as a victim remotely attractive. But now hostility and conflict escalate, seemingly without limits, because Jesus has deprived us of the myths that concealed or justified our victimising.

So, is there any good news in this, you might ask? Is this preacher going to just burn the house down and catch the first plane out of the country tomorrow morning without providing even a glimmer of hope?

Okay. Here's the good news, but I warn you that how good it will seem will depend a lot on how optimistic you are about the capacity of the world to embrace the way of Jesus that we have almost unanimously shown ourselves unwilling to embrace so far.

Jesus didn't just destroy our system of creating and maintaining a false peace; he offered us and modelled for us an alternative pathway out of hostility and chaos. It is called the way of the cross, and it is right there in his closing words in the reading we heard. "Take up your cross and follow me. Those who cling to their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Take up your cross and follow me. Jesus means that absolutely literally. The pathway to true peace, the salvation of the world from its own violent self-destruction, is only achieved by enough people following Jesus and doing what Jesus did. I don't mean that in any sort of spiritual supremacist way, like we need more people to call themselves Christians instead of Muslims or Buddhists or something. That's part of the old us-and-them mythologies of false peace.

What I mean is that we need enough people to respond to hostility and violence the way Jesus did, and that is by absorbing it and utterly refusing to reciprocate it or retaliate or seek vengeance. Only the complete and utter renunciation of retaliation and vengeance can break the cycle and prevent violence from escalating. Only an absolute commitment to loving our enemies and providing gracious hospitality to those who hate and persecute us can stop us creating more and more enemies. And only a willingness to keep on loving like that even when that is denounced as providing comfort and support to terrorists, and the lynch mob turns on you shouting "Crucify." That's what taking up your cross and following Jesus means. That's what it meant for Jesus. That's what it means for us. And if, and only if, we all do that, the world will be saved from its own self-destruction.

So far, we have shown little or no willingness to follow Jesus on the way of the cross. Jesus has always had more fans than followers, and even in his church, we have preferred to enlist his name into blasphemous and futile attempts to reinvigorate the old unjust us-and-them stabilities.

But Jesus has shown us the way of life, the way of true peace. He also preached clearly about the apocalypse that would inevitably come if we we turned our backs on his way and thus allowed the conflicts to escalate without limits. We either learn to love our enemies, or we fuel a fiery apocalypse that will consume us all. It is becoming more and more obvious that there is no other choice. I put before you life and death, says God. Therefore choose life.