

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

When in the Fall of 2006, Pope Benedict XVI quoted a 14<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine emperor in a paper that Benedict was giving, he found out that the world was listening, and much of it was aghast. The quote from that emperor was: “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” That quote was roundly condemned by people all over the world, including Muslims. One expert on Islam wrote, Benedict’s speech “prompted the near-predictable furor in the Muslim world. Religious and political authorities widely condemned the speech, with some calling for violence.” With a bit of sarcasm, I respond, “How can that be, since we all know that Islam is a religion of peace”? But the uproar was so great that Benedict bowed to public pressure and offered an apology through one of the Vatican’s officials: “the pope ‘sincerely regrets that certain passages of his address could have sounded offensive to the sensitivities of the Muslim faithful.’”

The Islamic State is a bit more honest. Spread their religion by the sword? “Of course, we do!” they say. Let me quote from a recent publication of ISIS (DABIQ, Shawwal 1437): “The religion of Islam will continue to be spread by the sword, even if Benedict despises such.” Well, that’s not surprising. It’s how Islam has always spread from its inception. ISIS that claims the mantle of true Islam admits “your disbelief [that is, your Christian belief] is the primary reason we hate you,” and they say “your disbelief is the primary reason we fight you, as we have been commanded to fight the disbelievers until they submit to the authority of Islam.”

But more than that, they claim that we Christians are just ignoring our Scriptures when we claim that ours truly is a religion of peace. Certainly there are violent passages in the Bible, mostly in the Old Testament, wherein God calls for the slaughter of the people the Israelites encountered as they made their way through the wilderness and conquered the promised land. This is true. But they also use a few words of Jesus to try to prove their case, words like in our Gospel lesson for today, words that challenge us.

Of course, they prefer the parallel passage from Matthew 10, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” But Luke records them this way: “*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.*”

Now these words do challenge us because they’re spoken by the child born to us, who was called by this name: “*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” They’re spoken by Him whom angels praised at His coming: “*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace ....*” They are spoken by

Him whose coming was *“to guide our feet into the way of peace,”* from Him who told the people He encountered and healed, *“go in peace,”* and who sent out His disciples with a message to their hearers, *“Peace be to this house.”* They are spoken by Him who on the night of His betrayal would say: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you”*, and just a few days later in the locked room on the evening of His resurrection: *“Peace be with you.”*

But here Jesus says, *“I have not come to bring peace,” “but rather division,” “a house divided,” three against two and two against three ... father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”*

ISIS thinks that this verse (and a couple other places) is Jesus calling Christians to “war and [violent] enforcement of divine law.” But that’s not it at all. Rather, Jesus is describing what His coming does, what His cross does, what His word does among people here on earth. At His coming Jesus was said to be a child *“appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel.”* By His cross, Jesus became *“A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.”* Moreover, *“the word of the cross”* divides. It is *“folly to those who are perishing,”* and *“a stumbling block,”* but it is also *“the power of God”* for *“us who are being saved.”* Thus, the writer to the Hebrews says, *“the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword—there’s the Christian sword, the living and active word of God; St. Paul calls that word the sword of the Spirit—piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*

This word of Christ is offensive to many, and it divides, for the message of the cross is exclusive. Exclusivity is the part of the Christian message that offends—that Christ alone saves, that He is the only way to the Father, *“the only name under heaven” “by which we must be saved.”* This message offends. It doesn’t bring peace on earth or good will to men—that translation is not all that good. The message of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone divides families three against two and two against three. It makes people angry and moves them to issue threats against believers, and issue gag orders, and imperil Christians’ livelihoods.

Christ, cross, Scripture ... these bring division on earth: Christians as opposed to Muslims, Christians as opposed to atheists or the secular, Christians as opposed to the “spiritual but not religious,” and the list goes on and on. And these all have their prophets, their imams, their apologists, their gurus. And they’re telling people their dreams. They prophesy to them, *“filling [them] with vain hopes,”* speaking *“visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD,”* telling them *“It*

*shall be well with you.*” “Go ahead, follow your *own heart.*” “*No disaster shall come upon you.*” But then Christians and their pastors tell them they’re wrong, and their message is filled with lies, and people don’t like that, and get angry at the truth-tellers. No peace on earth, but division.

And if I may say, that in that long period of history we call “Christendom” when Christianity was the power in the West, and one had to “go along to get along,” we were fooled by the illusion that peace on earth was possible. But now that Christianity has lost its place as the favored religion among the powerful, we’re finding out again just how little peace there is on earth.

Yes, Christ came to give division on earth. But Christ did not come to bring division between man and God. Man had already done a good enough job of that, sinning against God and His law, being ejected from the Garden, and from God’s intimate presence. What Christ came to do was not to widen that chasm, but to span the chasm between heaven and earth, to restore peace between God and man. Jesus would have to pass through fires on earth and the fires of hell to accomplish it. He would have to undergo a fiery baptism, being immersed into death and the grave to effect peace with God. But that’s what He did, by His blood: “All our debt Thou has paid; Peace with God once more is made: O Lord, have mercy!”

St. Paul describes it this way, that Jesus “*was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*” And we are saved when we trust this message. St. Paul continues, “*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.*”

This is the peace which we are to proclaim: not a false peace on earth, good will toward men—dreams and lies—but “*on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased,*” that is, peace for those who are recipients of His grace and trust in Him. Hear that message in more of the Lord’s word, “*I have said these things to you, that in me—that is, joined to Jesus by Holy Baptism...that in me, that is, abiding in Jesus by His word...that in me, that is, partaking of Jesus’ body offered up for you, and drinking His blood shed for you... that in me, you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*”

Dear friends, Jesus’ words today are no call for us Christians to take up the sword and war violently against false believers; that’s a Satanic twisting of Jesus’ words. Rather, they are a reminder that as we hold onto Christ, proclaim His cross, trust His word — and this alone — there will be division on earth, but in Christ, we live in the peace that passes all earthly understanding, and these will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto everlasting life.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.