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Lord, here are two swords!

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

I've been crisscrossing the country recently, destined for college auditoriums and churches. There I speak of the dire state of our spirits, tainted as they are by greed and war -- and by our nation's imperial aspirations. I contrast these realities with Jesus' astonishing counter offer: a world brimming with nonviolence, life and peace.

In Antigonish, Can.; Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, N.M.; Drew University in Madison, N.J.; River's Edge Retreat Center in Cleveland, Ohio; Peace Action in New York City; Michigan; Oregon; Sacramento, Calif.; and San Jose, Calif.'s annual "Carry the Vision" conference -- at every destination good people I meet share their struggles for justice and peace.

And at every destination someone invariably asks: "Are you trying to tell us that Jesus doesn't support our nation and our way of life? Are you suggesting that he disapproves of our war making -- that we should not kill?"

Often, someone points to a biblical passage purporting to show Jesus waffling on nonviolence.

I welcome such questions. If we are to follow Jesus, we need to grapple with these passages.

Here I reflect on one such question put to me last week from an earnest Dominican nun during our day long retreat in Adrian, Mich. The theme of our gathering was "Blessed are the peacemakers."

The Dominican sister's question: "What about that text from Luke where Jesus tells the disciples to take up the sword?"

The key to understanding is to begin, as in geometry, with an axiom. In particular, the one proposed by

Gandhi.

Jesus, Gandhi declared, was meticulously nonviolent. He embodied nonviolence; it determined all his actions -- from his eating with "sinners" to his confrontation in the Temple.

Luke's Gospel, in particular, shows Jesus as meek and gentle -- which is to say, nonviolent.

From Luke derives the popular image of the kindly Jesus, over his shoulders slung a lost lamb. In this Gospel especially, Jesus sides with the poor, heals the sick, and feels for people. One passage recounts Jesus' encounter with a grieving widow: "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep?'" (Luke 7:13).

Twice in this Gospel Jesus sends his disciples out on missions of peace and nonviolence.

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The first time -- in chapter nine -- he sends them to proclaim God's kingdom and to heal the sick.

"Take nothing for the journey." Jesus instructs his disciples. He says to bring neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money -- they're to rely solely on God.

The second time -- in chapter ten -- he sends out seventy-two followers as "lambs among wolves." That's a telling image. It describes nonviolent people who are going to walk among those for whom violence is second nature. Again the followers go without provisions -- to heal and proclaim God's reign of peace.

But later in the Gospel, Jesus' mood darkens after he commits civil disobedience in the Temple. Sitting around the table during the Passover meal he can foresee a bitter end: betrayal by Judas, denial by Peter.

And out Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane where in agony he prays. At precisely this terrible moment he turns to his disciples.

"When I sent you forth without a money bag or a sack or sandals, were you in need of anything?" Jesus asks.

"No, nothing," the disciples reply.

Jesus then warned them:

But now, one who has a money bag should take it, and likewise a sack, and one who does not have a sword should sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, namely, "He was counted among the wicked?"; and indeed, what is written about me is coming to fulfillment.

Then the disciples said: "Lord, here are two swords." But Jesus replied, "It is enough" (Luke 22:35-38).

On the face of it, it sounds as if Jesus changed his tune -- as if he were saying: "Circumstances have changed; I've got us in deep. Time now to take up arms."

But this is a naïve reading and it misses the subtle point.

Luke's Jesus is speaking poetically, apocalyptically. Jesus is determined throughout his public ministry to

fulfill the scriptures, especially the Hebrew Bible's so-called Second Isaiah. That's where we encounter the Suffering Servant and lofty oracles foretelling the beating of swords into plowshares and the end of the reign of death.

But Jesus knows now the world cannot understand his role as the fulfillment of the scriptures.

Jesus, the embodiment of goodness, will be "counted among the wicked." That is, regarded as a violent threat -- an assassin, a destroyer, a fierce revolutionary. We recall that when Roman soldiers arrive to arrest him, Jesus says: "Why do you come at me as if I were a brigand?"

But now the distraught Jesus, just hours before execution, is saying in effect: "Misunderstood as I am, we might as well have a money bag and a sword."

Deft writer that Luke is, he takes the misunderstanding to its limits. Even Jesus' disciples misunderstand. They take Jesus literally.

Here's a violent messiah, after all. It's time, fellas, to rise up against Rome. They hear "sword" and off they scurry to look for one.

Proudly they produce two. And Jesus, barely keeping the glimmer of light alive, snaps: "Stop. It's enough!" Or in a better translation: "Oh, forget it!"

The misunderstanding is complete. The scriptures foretell it; Jesus resigns himself to it. It is part and parcel of his vocation.

But the Gospel doesn't end there. Jesus presses the matter even yet.

During the tussle of the arrest, the disciples collectively ask for permission: Can we strike now? And one impetuous disciple (the other Gospels identify him as Peter) is in no mood to wait for an answer. He takes a swing and hacks off an ear of one of the Roman guards.

And again comes a rebuke from Jesus: "Enough! No more of this!"

When the disciples realize that Jesus refuses to take up arms even at this terrible moment they take to their heels. This nonviolent Jesus is more than they had bargained for.

My friend, the late Jesuit Fr. Richard McSorley, wrote in his classic book *New Testament Basis for Peacemaking*:

The literal interpretation [of this passage] is in conflict with the whole context of the gospel and with Jesus' refusal a few hours later to be defended by the sword of Peter.

No twisting or turning of this text can equate Jesus' words with war. Carrying a sword on a journey in those days was not making war or preparing for it. Using a sword to kill others, however, was not in accord with the normal practice of Jesus' disciples.

McSorley suggests that Luke's Jesus is testing his disciples' understanding of nonviolence and realizes that they still do not understand. Jesus hopes that they will object to the idea, reflecting their understanding of the ways of their master. But, obtuse as they are -- a veiled typing of us all -- they fail to object. They take him literally.

As for me, questions arise: Why are male disciples attached to the idea of a violent messiah? Why is it so hard for us to understand the nonviolent Jesus?

Why do we take the verse about the sword literally, while we refuse to take literally verses that command us not to retaliate, as in: "Offer no violent resistance to one who does evil?" or "love your enemies?"

The same misunderstanding of Jesus' nonviolence runs rampant today.

We have trailed so far behind Jesus that most Christians and Catholics can scarcely conceive of loving their enemies or putting down the sword. Instead they vote for war, pay taxes for war and prayerfully send their young off to kill.

Many pro-life Catholics in Los Alamos, Nev. -- near my home base -- make their living by designing and maintaining nuclear weapons. They wield a nuclear sword over us all.

What is so remarkable is that, despite the disciples and the culture's complete misunderstanding of his nonviolence, Jesus remained committed to it to the end. He practiced what he preached. He does not attack the disciples or give up on them.

And of course there was no end.

Jesus rose and appeared and, in a spirit of forgiveness alien to us, continues to call us still to walk the road of nonviolence -- to heal and proclaim God's reign of peace.

You too will be misunderstood, perhaps persecuted, perhaps jailed and killed, Jesus says. But follow me anyway on the path of love and peace. Be nonviolent no matter what -- even if no one understands. I understand, he says, and some day, everyone else will too.

In Michigan, with a twinkle in my eye, I concluded one of my talks by offering something of a syllogism.

If we insist on reading like fundamentalists -- if we insist on taking the text literally because we are dead-set on reserving our "right" to violence -- then clearly the passage limits the entire world to only two swords.

And we'll all have to share them.

This week, John will be in Davenport, Iowa to receive the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award from the Quad Cities Pacem in Terris Coalition. John's collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. John's recent book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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