

Back in 1999 there was a big story in Chicago about how the baby Jesus figure had been stolen from the nativity scene at Daley Plaza.

Eventually the police recovered the baby at a bus station after an anonymous tip.

After that they started securing the baby Jesus figure with a cable and a bolt and a padlock to the manger to prevent anybody from stealing it again.

It didn't work though, because in 2004 the same thing happened.

This time it was a 19-year-old college student who was able to slip the baby out from underneath the cable.

They upped the security measures once again.

A team of people is now responsible for making sure that baby Jesus doesn't get stolen anymore from Daley Plaza.

The goal of these guys is to make sure that Jesus never leaves the manger again.

Have we bolted our perception of Jesus down to the manger? Do we imagine Jesus as an adult the same way we view him as a baby. As an adult do we picture him as being a mild, sweet-natured, and gentle Saviour, someone who talks softly, who's got a perfect complexion and a twinkle in his eye. We rarely think of him as being aggressive or confrontational or combative or in any way socially impolite.

Then you hear these words, they seem strong and stern but they are truthful. "Whoever acknowledges me before people, I will acknowledge them before my Father in heaven. And whoever disowns me before people, I will disown them before my Father in heaven. Do not suppose that I've come to the earth to bring peace. I did not come to bring peace, but the sword—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 in his own household. And anyone who loves his mother and father more than me is not worthy of me. And anybody who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

It sounds a bit shocking. It doesn't sound right. Is this the Jesus we know and love? The Jesus who speaks of family and of peace. This sounds wrong. How can such stern and horrid things come out of the mouth of Jesus? Is this an overstatement like "if your eye offends you, gouge it out," or "if your hand offends you, cut it off."

These words come in a challenge to the disciples in Matthew 10. Jesus speaks about going to the lost sheep of Israel (Jews.) As you go, preach about the kingdom of heaven. Say the kingdom of God is near. When you go to a place, if it finds your favour, then let your peace rest on the house. But if it doesn't, then shake the dust off your feet, because it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment than for that town. And what's going to happen? They will flog you in the synagogues, and father will betray child and brother will betray brother and all people will hate you because of me.

**This is Jesus telling the disciples how it is for those who will take him seriously.**

A few years ago I went to a lecture called "Burn your plastic Jesus." The lecture had thousands of people attend. It aimed to instruct Christians that we needed to rediscover the authentic Jesus of the New Testament"

The lecturer said "There are false perceptions of Jesus that people have. Some see Him as the really nice respectable guy and then of course there is 'prosperity Jesus' - if you worship Jesus he'll make you rich. Then there's a tolerant Jesus - that whatever you do, he's OK with it. There's the 'religious Jesus', where people say Jesus is all about rules and regulations."

I think if we are honest it's possible that we too can construct a Christian faith that is comfortable. We can build things around the way in which *we* see life, rather than around Gods way. As God, Jesus has the right to shock disciples with teaching they don't like to hear, because he's Lord.

Jesus talks in this radical, shocking, way often. He expects us to be startled, & awakened. It's very important however to remember what he said elsewhere. He also said, for example, "Blessed are the *peacemakers*." Otherwise we only hear, "I didn't come to bring peace," and then say, "Okay, let's go make war." No, we remember that Jesus also said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God"

Jesus was the son of God, far more than an ordinary prophet. He has come from heaven to earth, and the message he brings is going to cut like a sword.

Verse 38 **Jesus is saying you have got to love me more, more than family.** "And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." So, the family is not first and it does not have supreme authority either. The disciple loves Jesus above the preciousness of the family, and the disciple follows Jesus before the authority of mother or father.

This is what Jesus meant by bringing a sword, not peace. Jesus has supreme authority, and therefore, he claims in every family, and in every business, and in every school, and in every church, and in every political party, and in every country a superior allegiance, a superior love.

Jesus has come into the world to disrupt (this is what *sword* means) all human allegiances that don't put him first — to be loved above all other values, and to be followed above all other authorities.

True story from the book "Hiding in the Light" is the story of Rifqa's remarkable spiritual journey from Islam to Christianity. She was raised in a strict Muslim family and one evening she was beaten by her brother. She ran away from her father's threats to find refuge with strangers in Florida, only to face a controversial court case that reached national headlines. Most of all, it is the story of a young girl who made life-changing sacrifices to follow Jesus – she lost everything but gained eternal life and truth. Faith In Jesus can divide families.

I also read a true story of a young man, Philip, who was baptized in a Christian church. In a western middle class family, he shared how he'd been brought up in a home of love but hadn't heard about Jesus. He realised after he began to follow Jesus that he should be baptised to show he was serious about being a disciple.

Sadly he never shared about the baptism with his parents, and even though he was a young adult, two hours after his service, the pastor received a telephone call from a very angry woman. She said, "I'm disgusted with you. I'm Phillip's mother, and what you did this morning was just so *disgusting*. You made him stand up there and be baptized and he talked about sin and being forgiven. I'm consulting my lawyer, because I'm going to sue you." She slammed the phone down before the minister could say anything.

Phillip avoided the minister and sadly he never came back to church. He wasn't prepared to stand up for Jesus, his mother won.

Jesus is real, and following Him can be costly. It can divide families. Our **devotion** to Jesus will cause **divisions** with the world. We are called to follow Him AND To acknowledge Him. Of course, we need to be sure who He is, so we don't misrepresent Him. We need to get beyond the baby Jesus and the plastic Jesus. So, we need to read about Jesus in His word. Get to know Him.

Conclusion: Christiana Tsai was a Christian woman who developed an eye disease that made it impossible for her to see light directly and was virtually blind. She had to wear very dark glasses.

Yet, she did not withdraw into her own room and say how tough she has it. No, she used her limitation to share with all who came to visit her that she is a disciple of Jesus Christ. She wrote about her life. She wrote about Christ

helping her in her weakness and limitation and she became a witness for Christ.

That was her cross. It was not just being blind – many people can become blind, but not do something for Christ with it. Christiana Tsai used her blindness as her way to show she is a disciple of Christ. That was her cross which she bore every day to follow Jesus Christ.

Where does this leave us?

Is Jesus most important in your life?

Is He your greatest priority?