

Swords Into Plowshares; Spears Into Pruning Hooks

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish

One of the most inspiring prophecies of the Old Testament, and one that is repeated almost *verbatim* in Isaiah and in Micah, tells about a time "in the latter days" when after a period of punishment and desolation Israel would be restored to her former glory. Then, as we read, people of many nations would gather together in recognition of the Lord to hear His Word and to walk in His paths in peace and prosperity.

"For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is. 2:3-4 & Micah 4:2-3).

The words of the prophecy are poetic, and very beautiful. As such the metaphor is well known throughout the civilized world: swords and spears represent war while plowshares and pruning hooks represent peace. When the instruments of war are no longer needed they will be converted into farm implements and people will be able to live contentedly in their own places, minding their own business. The Lord will judge right and wrong, taking away the sphere of oppression, and there will be no conflict.

"But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all people (shall) walk each in the name of his god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever" (Micah 4:4-5).

What a wonderful vision! What a happy state! In fact, this is another prophecy of the Lord's coming into the world, when,

"'In that day,' says the Lord, 'I will assemble the lame, I will gather the outcast and those whom I have afflicted; I will make the lame a remnant, and the outcast a strong nation; so the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on, even forever'" (Micah 4:6-7).

Sometimes in our hardships and pain it is difficult to "get" this vision, and even more difficult to imagine how it might apply to us, unless maybe it's some sort of reward that we'll be able to enjoy in heaven, at

the end of our long battle with temptations in the world. After all, when the Lord did come into the world He plainly said, "Do *not* think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword!" (Matt. 10:34). But in the spiritual sense we know that the "plowshares prophecy," like all prophecies, doesn't only tell us about the future in *time*, it tells us about the potential in our lives *now* - spiritually - as we learn to endure the consequences of our foolish decisions and receive the Lord (as He is ALWAYS coming to us) in the love and wisdom of His Word.

Incidentally, consistent with the Lord's words in Matthew there is *another* prophecy in Joel, who may well have written even before Micah or Isaiah (certainly before the captivity in Babylon), in which the Lord says,

"Proclaim this among the nations: 'Prepare for war! Wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near, let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears!'" (Joel 3:9-10).

So the Lord does not deny the place or need for battle in the work of regeneration, but He does promise that *after the battle*, after the conflict with the falsities and evils in ourselves, if we accept the Lord's judgments, there will be peace.

So now let's look at the message about the swords and plowshares more carefully. In our recitation this morning (John 15:4-7) we were reminded of the Lord's analogy of the vine and the branches. He is the vine, we are the branches, and as such we are in Him as He is in the Father: *forms* of love or wisdom that can bear fruit in useful life. But remember how that 15th chapter of John begins:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine dresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; *and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*"

This pruning should be a reminder of the "pruning hooks" of the Old Testament prophets. What actually happens when you prune a tree or vine is that you cut shoots or branches out of it; but you do it with a couple of things in mind: first you may be trying to shape the thing so that it lets sufficient light and air get into all the branches that remain, and so that the fruit is not too difficult to harvest. But most importantly

you will be directing its energy so that it is not dissipated in the production of leaves rather than fruit. You will be *concentrating* the sap into those branches that can produce *more* or possibly *better quality* fruit than others.

All this is of course symbolic. In the Word the branches of a tree correspond to the truths or "branches of knowledge" that support the production of the fruit that is *good works* or the life of charity. "Pruning" keeps us from getting carried away with knowledge for its own sake, and helps us direct our energy into the good and useful things of life. Remember the fig tree that the Lord condemned? It was all leaves and no fruit. So we should beware of the condemnation, or at any rate the uselessness of faith alone. Knowing what to do is important, but knowing without doing is like saving money for its own sake, without using it.

Now think about the act of pruning. The overall image of a man in his vineyard, peacefully working his way down the trellises, evokes a peaceful feeling. But remember, the job involves cutting, and the cutting involves a separation and removal of part of each vine. So in our lives the job of pruning corresponds to the recognition of those aspects of our own character that are not worthy to remain with us - either because they are unproductive or because they interfere in some way with other aspects that need or deserve more attention. It involves the decision to cut those things out, and, in the end, to throw them away so that the better, stronger qualities in us can flourish and bear more excellent or more plentiful fruit.

So - back to our pastoral vineyard scene - as we watch the man working among the trellises we find that the picture includes small piles of young shoots and branches neatly stacked along the rows, waiting to be gathered up and - most likely - thrown in a fire. It is still a peaceful, pleasant picture, but now we can see that an important part of it is what the Lord teaches us about self-examination, or if you will, self-analysis, and genuine repentance: carefully discerning and cutting away and casting off those undesirable qualities within ourselves that would prevent the Lord from realizing His potential with us if they were left to grow.

In the prophecies of Micah and Isaiah we are reminded that when the Lord comes to us, that is, when we truly receive Him into our hearts, this pruning of *our own* trees or vines will *replace* the activities represented

by spears, which are designed to hurt and kill *others*. In fact, spears, like arrows in the Word, correspond to the truths of doctrine we need to fight against what is wrong or false. But when that battle is over then we can turn to the more subtle task of refining and strengthening the truths that remain so that they will produce good fruit. This is the self-evaluation, self-judgment, and self-improvement that constitute the life of genuine charity once the intellectual arguments are over. This is the more *interior* work of directing the truth into what is good in our spiritual world so that "everyone may sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid." The vine specifically corresponds to our understanding and the fig tree to our will, especially the will as expressed in a charitable outward life.

As for swords being turned into plowshares, this is another fascinating image involving a similar idea. Of course the sword is designed to cut and chop other people. It can be an instrument of self-defense or a tool of hostile aggression, but the point is that the sword is used for battle. In contrast a plow - or as the Writings translate it, a HOE, is used for cultivating one's own land, one's own field or vineyard. Here again we have the simple distinction between war and peace, but we also have a lot more: for in this image the Lord is showing us the difference between cutting and chopping at things (or people) outside of ourselves, and being critical of **ourselves**. He is showing us the difference between judgment of others on the one hand and the cultivation of our own affections on the other. For the ground or soil in any story of the Word really corresponds to the human mind, especially as to the will or affections that are there. And to cultivate is to dig up and turn that soil over so that it will be aerated and kept free of weeds.

Going deeper, the sword corresponds to truth which is used to distinguish between right and wrong, and if necessary to cut down or destroy opposing falsity. But notice that the plow, or hoe, is also a cutting instrument. It is used to dig, to chop, to lift the soil and to turn it over. So it is another image of the truth, but this time working in the field of our affections, digging up things that may interfere with the growth and development of a good and true and useful life. Who knows what rocks and seeds and mold and fungus may lie just beneath the surface of our conscious attitude or feelings? Who knows until we dig and plow and so get **into** those affections, turning them inside out so that the deeper layers may be exposed to the light and air of wisdom?

This is a challenging process! And just the same as it is with pruning, the picture we get in our mind's eye generally is of a very peaceful scene. But on closer examination there's a lot of work involved. Digging around in the soil of our feelings, poking, chopping, analyzing, exposing things within ourselves that may not be very pleasant is a strenuous and often time consuming exercise. On one hand it may not involve intellectual conflict, for the intellect is represented by the hoe, and it is digging in the will, but anyone who has done any work with a hoe - or for that matter with an old-fashioned plow - can understand the sort of resistance that may be involved in the task.

Our will is the ground of our being. It is the basis of our individuality, our sense of identity, our *proprium* or "that which is our own." What we feel is who we are. And this does not like to be disturbed. But it has to be disturbed; it has to be examined; it has to be exposed by means of the hard-edged and pointed tools the Lord gives us in the teachings of His Word. Unless we dig and open up and see what is beneath the surface of our lives we will never be able to change or grow much of anything except what is sown by the forces of nature - wild things, weak things, weeds and seeds of worldly ambition. But what is equally important about plowing and cultivating our affections is that when we do it as a regular thing it gets a little easier every time. Gradually, season by season, we clear the major obstacles - the roots and stumps and most obnoxious weeds, and we keep the soil soft and loose so that when we go over it we meet less and less resistance.

Soil that has never been plowed can become very hard. Soil that is plowed regularly will respond to the blade with neat furrows ready to receive the seeds of wisdom that the Lord can sow according to **His** will and providence for us as He prepares us for the fulfillment of a heavenly life.

Finally, and you may have wondered how in the world this was going to tie in, let's remember the lesson of the second reading this morning in which the Samaritans rejected Jesus. James and John saw this and challenged Him, saying, "Lord, Do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" But the Lord said, no, "For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them." Then a discussion arose as they walked along the road and they talked about following the Lord. And one of them said he would follow Him but that he wanted to go bury his father first. Another said the same but that he wanted to go and bid farewell to those at his

house. Then the Lord answered, "No one having put his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

Surely one of the lessons here is that once we understand the need to break and turn the soil of our own minds, cultivating our affections according to the teachings of the Word, there is no turning back. Once we recognize that the kingdom of heaven is within and that the cultivation of the ground for reception of that kingdom is up to us, and most of all once we start that process, we must realize that looking back to our old ways, looking back to our old patterns, falling back into our old habits is only going to result in crooked furrows, broken tools and a lot of frustration.

At this point there is no hope or fulfillment in a merely worldly life, and there is no long term benefit in giving up the spiritual work. We simply must go forward. We must look to the Lord, cut straight furrows, watch for the rocks and stumps and weeds that get in the way, and bring up whatever comes up to be addressed from within ourselves. Remember, we are going to plow our own field, not someone else's. We are going to prune our own trees or vines, not someone else's. We are going to cultivate our own thoughts and affections by removing whatever stands in the way of reception of the Lord's eternal love and wisdom so He may grow His kingdom in us and we may indeed be called "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified" (Is. 61:3). In this way His kingdom *will* come, and we will find enduring peace. Amen.

Lessons: Micah 4:1-8, Children's talk on the Coming of the Lord, Luke 9:51-62 and Apocalypse Explained #734:2-3