

John Docherty, 2013-05-05

“... my peace I leave with you ...”

The theme of my message this morning is Jesus’ offer of peace to his disciples. The lectionary reading from John’s gospel is our starting point : “... Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you ... do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid ...”

They’re words of comfort, meant to reassure his disciples that, whatever might come, they are loved by God, and under the watchful care of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of external circumstances, they are to have no cause for fear or trembling, because ultimately they are under God’s protection.

Even if they lose their lives in Jesus’ name, this is not a sign that God has abandoned them. Matthew quotes Jesus as saying that “... those who lose their life for my sake will find it ...”. (10:39)

Similar promises are found elsewhere in the New Testament writings. In the 3rd chapter of the letter to the Colossians, Paul encourages them to “... let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.”(v. 15)

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul also offers *them* the same kind of encouragement : (4:7) “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

It should come as no surprise that in my work with survivors of political violence and torture, this is a recurring theme for some people. Christians who have suffered terrible things often lean heavily on these kinds of promises to get them through. They need to know that God has not abandoned them, that God is somehow there with them in the torture cell, and that they have not been forgotten.

But, at the same time, I’m sure you can also appreciate that there is sometimes a high degree of ambivalence about God that easily gives rise to questions like

“How could God let this happen?”

‘Why me?’

“What have I done to deserve this?”

“Is God really there ...?”

Of course, you don't have to go through an experience of torture to struggle with these questions. Any experience that upends your world can undermine your expectations of how fair life should be, and how faithfully protective God is of *you* as an individual.

The loss of a parent, a spouse, a child, a sibling, a close friend, can leave a void that forces us to re-evaluate who we are, how we self-identify, and how we feel about God.

A diagnosis of a serious illness can hammer home the reality of our mortality, and force us to try to come to terms with what it means to face an uncomfortably finite physical existence – and wonder : “what's next ...?”

The loss of a job or role we've held and loved for some time can trigger a loss of a sense of identity, and leave us floundering in a morass of self-doubt and insecurity. Trust me, I know ...

But Jesus isn't promising that we will always be protected from pain or conflict. Far from it. What he is offering is the reassurance that, in some way we'll probably never fully understand, God is there with us in that pain. He's offering an internalised sense of peace that surpasses anything the world has to offer.

“... my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives ...”

But that part of the promise, the “not giving to you as the world gives” part, got me thinking.

Yes, it is a promise of internal tranquility in the face of external difficulties. But, as is often the case with Jesus' teachings, there is a challenging flip-side to this promise.

When you consider what the world offers as “peace” it's not so bad really.

It's the absence of warfare, strife and conflict.

It's a secure and safe environment.

It's an orderly society that one can navigate in a reasonably predictable way.

Of course, this kind of peace also comes with some need for rules, regulations, and forced conformity, but that's just the price to be paid for the benefits.

I think I can live with that. In fact, I *know* I can live with that for the most part - it's the only kind of world I've ever known.

I say "for the most part" because I'm only too well aware that while *I* have enjoyed a peaceful, safe and relatively easily navigable life, it's been at the cost of suffering and oppression in other parts of the world where peace, safety, and choice have been rare commodities, and where *my* thirst for resources creates an environment where life is not so easily navigable, and where peace and safety can be in short supply.

I'm not suggesting that anyone run out to watch it, but there's a great scene in Monty Python's "Life of Brian", where a local cell of the "People's Front of Judea" (not to be confused with the posers of the "Judean People's Front") in first-century Israel is drawing up a list of demands, and denouncing the Roman occupation.

They want the dismantling of the apparatus of the Roman imperialist state, and one of them rhetorically shouts out : "What have the Romans ever given *us!*?"

To which one of them timidly suggests "aqueducts".

OK then, we want them to dismantle everything but the aqueducts!

And the sanitation system, let's keep that.

And, of course, the roads – they obviously have to stay, it goes without saying.

Oh, and irrigation, and medicine, and education as well, and let's not forget wine, ... and finally "world peace", the so-called "Pax Romana" – the peace of the Roman Empire.

Our version of the Pax Romana makes us the beneficiaries of this kind of peace. And while that makes for a very comfortable lifestyle, we know it has its dark side, and that brings its own discomfort.

I'm not going to take this particular line any further. I could spend the rest of the message, and probably several others, exploring how to make this world a more just place on a planetary scale. But I'm only too aware that any "*answers*" I might

have to offer would be facile, superficial and inadequately informed. I'm not smart enough, strong enough, or courageous enough to attempt anything approaching a reasonable treatment of that challenge.

I'm also conscious enough of my own hypocrisy in calmly accepting the benefits of the peace the world offers *me*.

So let's limit ourselves to something a little more manageable.

I said earlier that I think there's a challenging flip-side to this offer of peace, and what I've just said about our political and economic structures is part of that.

But it strikes me that there is another element at play much closer to home, and on a much more modest level. Jesus isn't promising us peace as the world offers peace. He's offering us something different – isn't he? Apart from the internal peace that comes from a loving God, surely he's also offering us the possibility of a community that embodies peace without the dark side of oppression, conflict and forced conformity.

At least in the church and in our own personal relationships true peace, internal and external, is surely attainable.

Unfortunately, in Matthew's gospel Jesus also has something to say about peace, and he's quoted in quite a different way :

Matthew 10.34-39 “³⁴ ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Well, *that's* not very comforting.

“ I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Now in my evangelical background, this passage is typically used to point to the need for faithfulness in the face of opposition from those closest to you. You *need* to follow Jesus, even if it means leaving your family behind.

To some extent, I'm still willing to accept a version of that reading. I no longer adhere to a very narrow understanding of what faithfulness looks like, but I *do* think it does apply to those who are trying to be faithful in the face of opposition. I think it *is* a call to follow God, regardless of who tries to stop you.

Where I'm less comfortable is the image of Jesus having come to "... set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law ..."

This is inconsistent with the Jesus I would rather follow. This is not the gentle admonition to "love your neighbour", nor is it the welcoming Jesus who invites the children "to come to me."

This is a Jesus who seems to be embracing conflict. He seems to be deliberately trying to shake up his hearers and I have difficulty reconciling this Jesus with the one I know and love.

And yet, as I grapple with this passage for a while, I begin to wonder : "What is the nature of this sword that he's brought? Is it only, or even primarily, a weapon of destruction and strife, or is it a tool for forcing engagement?"

Is it something that forces people apart, leaving only blood and gore on the pavement, or is it something that forces people to struggle with each other and seek justice rather than passively suffering hurt and exclusion?"

By way of a partial answer to these questions, let's look at another passage from Matthew's gospel.

Chapter 5: ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister^{*} has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,^{*} and then come and offer your gift.

The first thing to note here is that if we want to be reconciled to God, we first need to work at reconciliation with our brothers and sisters. Let's assume that this admonition is not limited to just blood relations – the Lord's prayer insists on more or less the same thing : "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

The second thing to note is that the Matthew passage flips the Lord's prayer around. The "Our Father" requires forgiving those who have hurt us. The Matthew

passage requires us to examine how we have hurt others, and then take the initiative to try to make that right before we approach God.

This, too, is one of the reasons I am a Mennonite. I think from the early days of the Anabaptist reformation there has been a clear sense that our commitment to God is a commitment to each other.

That we are called to acknowledge that we are sometimes hurt, and sometimes hurtful.

That we are not to seek God's forgiveness in the dark, anonymous secrecy of the priestly confessional, but in the open forgiving arms of those we have hurt.

We're called to *make this work*.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again ... relationships matter, and we are not free to walk away from interpersonal conflict. We are called to grapple with how we treat each other, and to make things right when we are responsible for broken relationships.

Now, let me immediately confess that this meditation is firmly entrenched in the "do as I say, not as I do" family of sermons.

I hate conflict. I hate confrontation.

I lean heavily on Paul's version of this call in Romans 12 : ¹⁸"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

I really like the "... if it is possible ... so far as it depends on you ..." bits. It feels like it gives me a bit of an "out" when things aren't going well with someone. I can always rationalise and say "well, not all of it depends on me. I can only do so much."

But, of course, that's a cop-out. There's usually plenty of room for reconciliation if I really want it. If someone has hurt me, I can forgive, and that can be pretty much the end of it.

But you know as well as I do that forgiveness doesn't always come that easily. If the pain is fresh, it may take up too much emotional space for forgiveness to be likely.

By the same token, if I've held on to the pain and resentment for too long a time, nursed it, fed on it, forgiveness begins to look like a pale sort of compensation.

If I really can't get past the hurt, though, I *can* try to find the courage to confront the person responsible and seek some kind of acknowledgment or gesture of remorse to help me achieve some kind of closure.

If I, on the other hand, am the one responsible for having hurt someone else, I really don't have any excuse that would allow me to avoid making things right. I don't have any control over whether or not the other person is willing to forgive me, but I do have complete control over whether or not I will seek that forgiveness and try to make things right.

Now, this assumes that I'm sensitive enough to realise that I'm in the wrong.

Or, that I'm willing to hold my defensiveness at bay if someone *accuses* me of being in the wrong. That I'm willing to pause, count to ten, and honestly examine my own behaviour.

I don't have any brilliant way of making this easier. It's hard. It requires all of the parties to a conflict to be willing to be vulnerable :

For those who are hurting, the vulnerability is in confronting the person responsible for the hurt and risking being hurt anew by an inappropriate response.

For those who have been responsible for hurting another, the vulnerability lies in being willing to recognise one's faults and responding with grace.

You know, for the last couple of years we've struggled with this peace lamp. We've sometimes had plenty of flame along with an inordinate amount of smoke. We sometimes have a very clean, smoke-free flame, that sputters and goes out with the slightest breeze.

We haven't quite mastered its idiosyncrasies. So one of the tasks I gave myself as part-time interim interim pastor was to try to figure out how to make this thing work right. So I did my research, looked up the manufacturer's instructions, and think I've almost got it.

When all else fails, read the instructions.

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Let's read the full passage of Paul's encouragement to the Colossians :

Ch 3:¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.