

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

I read this piece of the gospel shortly after watching television news. I am afraid that there was not much peaceful about it. God knows the peace that the world gives leaves a great deal to be desired. Our nation is at war on at least two fronts. We have been at war for eight years, longer than World War II. Car bombings continue throughout the world. I heard that about 9000 people have been killed by bombs in Pakistan alone. We were all frightened by the possibility of a devastating explosion in Times Square. Armed conflicts are a fact of life in many parts of the world. We need Christ’s peace.

Even where there is no armed conflict, “peace” is maintained by oppression and coercion in many places. The ability to dissent is severely limited. Corruption is often the way business is conducted. In Jesus’ time there was the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. There was little military expansion of the empire, and it allowed building an impressive infrastructure. But there was a cost. Dissent and challenges to the occupation of Rome were brutally put down. Taxes and tribute were demanded in order to maintain the luxurious life style of those in power. There are many places that continue to be oppressed in similar fashion. Tibet, Venezuela, Darfur are only a few that come to mind. The peace that the world gives often seems like no peace at all. We need Christ’s peace.

Even in our own life as a society, conflict and division seem to be the order of the day. Partisan politics allows no place for compromise or even thoughtful and respectful debate. Our own Anglican communion has been divided by rancorous name calling and schism. Conflicts both local and national have turned off many who no longer attend church. The ones who shout the loudest get their way, while others feel oppressed. This is peace as the world gives it, and it seems like no peace at all. We need the peace of Christ.

Instead we try to make our own peace. When we were in Florida, I was struck by the number of large houses hidden behind high walls. The houses appeared to be quite expensive, so this peace is affordable to only a few. I may be reading too much into it, but I suspect that these folks were trying to carve out a space of security and peace for themselves. Beyond their walls the world is a place to be feared, a place where they must be on guard. Their peace seems to come at a great cost. This too is peace as the world gives it.

There are other ways we try to make our own peace. Some self-medicate with alcohol or drugs or too much television to gain a few moments of oblivious pleasure, when the rest of the world can be tuned out. It may dampen the turmoil of busy and troubled lives for a time, but we know that it is only an escape. This too is peace as the world gives it, and we do not find it satisfying. We may be able to still the turmoil that lies at the surface of our daily lives, but there is a deeper turmoil, that fears our isolation, our alienation, our death.

There is a kind of peace that comes from denial or from blinding ourselves to what goes on beyond our walls. Even we Christians are sometimes guilty of it. Many of us worship, or meditate, or pray to find solace only, and not for strength to send us out into the world to do what the Lord asks us to do. We want to know that we are OK and acceptable. We want that personal relationship with Jesus to comfort us, but not to challenge us. We want a Jesus who will quiet the storms, who will keep us safe, who will make sure our health and our bank accounts are adequate. When life turns out otherwise, we get mad at God for letting us down.

In the gospel Jesus offers a different kind of peace. But what does Jesus' peace look like? On the surface it doesn't look all that peaceful. Jesus knows he is about to be arrested, tortured, and crucified. That hardly sounds peaceful. He was speaking to the disciples, most of whom would be persecuted and martyred for their faith. How can Jesus talk about giving them his peace?

It is this peace, God's peace, Jesus' peace, with which we bless each other every week. We are not asking, of course, that we all become martyrs. We are not asking that all the chances and changes of this life pass us by. But we are asking that we find a deep tranquility about whatever happens to us because we are in a trusting relationship with Jesus Christ. I would suggest that tranquility of spirit is founded on three pillars – truth, justice, and obedience.

We can find peace in God because we trust that Jesus has told us the truth. It is a wonderful truth that God loves us enough to become one of us, that there is eternal life after death, that forgiveness and new birth is part of God's essence. Such things let us live life more lightly because despite the chaos around us, we are secure in God's love and forgiveness. Because we need not fear death, we are free to risk our lives for his purpose. He has a plan.

This truth is not an easy truth, and we Christians approach it with our eyes wide open. To live the truth in a world that lives in denial can be dangerous. To a world that values the rational and physical and self-serving above all, we appear foolish and naïve for our spiritual orientation and for our concern for others. But we are not afraid, because we have the peace of God.

The peace that Jesus gives requires a sense of justice. First of all, we trust that God's justice will have its way in the end. We do not have to judge those who do bad things, or to be accountable for how the world turns out. We are just asked to be faithful, and God will take care of how things come out. That too can be very freeing. At the same time, when we see injustice being done, we cannot stand idly by. How can we be at peace when our brothers and sisters are being mistreated, or God's creation being corrupted? It is not enough to pray for our own tranquility while we are blind to suffering around us. I know we cannot cure all of the world's ills singlehanded, but perhaps we can do *one* thing to make things better. Perhaps we can share our hope, and our peace, with those without hope or peace. In that action we will find God's peace.

The peace that Jesus gives requires our obedience. We too are to be his disciples, to follow where Jesus leads us. That requires a sense of surrender and the deep belief that God's way is better than any way we can devise. This too is unlike the peace the world gives, which suggests that the one who takes charge of their life, who stays in control, is the winner. But surrendering our lives to God frees us from making all the decisions. Confidence that we are on the right track, God's track, gives us peace.

The peace that Jesus gives is no superficial thing. His peace does not mean that our lives will be without conflict or turmoil. In fact it may make it more likely. But the peace that Jesus gives is the deep assurance that he is with us and that we follow a truth more profound than the world can fathom.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.