

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 8th October 2023

When a Bishop celebrates Mass, he begins by standing in front of his people and greeting them, as a successor of the apostles, with the words 'Peace be with you' – just as the Lord had instructed the seventy two to greet any house they entered with 'Peace be to this house!' (Luke 10.5). Also, when the risen Lord greets his disciples he does so with the words 'Peace be with you' (John 20.19,21,26).

It is clear, then, both from the scriptures and the liturgy, that peace is something central to the Christian faith. Immediately before holy communion the priest prays for peace, and invites all those present to share with one another a sign of peace. So, when St Paul writes to the Philippians that their hearts and thoughts will be guarded by 'that peace of God which is so much greater than we can understand' he is plugging into something at the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ: We are to be rooted in peace, protected in peace, and furthermore to be apostles of peace – a peace which is so much greater than anything we can concoct for ourselves.

You don't need to tell me that peace is something that we all crave, something we all strive for. It is our dream for our own lives, our dream for our children and our grandchildren, and our dream for countless millions of people who we have never met. There are, of course, some people who seem to thrive on conflict, on violence, on opposition, but they are never people who we would otherwise think admirable or virtuous: all people of good will, all people who are trying to live truly human and humane lives, long for peace. So, where is it to be found?

There are, I suppose, two sorts of peace: external peace (am I at peace with those around me, with other people, with God?) and internal peace (am I at peace with myself, at peace within?) We cannot always control external peace: if someone is determined to hurt us, to attack us, to undermine us, to control us, there is only so much we can do. We can ask ourselves how we might best respond – is this something so important that, lovers of peace as we may be, we need to resist? Ought I to give way, to surrender the demands of strict justice, in the interests of peace? Or must I resist? In the interests of detachment, perhaps I can look at this situation as if it were happening to someone else. Removing my own feelings, my own emotions, and imagining this was happening to someone else, how might I react? What advice would I give them? Can I, then, be at peace by taking my own advice?

It is difficult for us to control external peace, difficult to find a neutral place on which to stand and make judgements. But what about inner peace, about what is going on inside our own minds? We are buffeted by so many assaults, or anxieties, or preoccupations, or obsessions, how can we ever be at peace? How can we ever cut our way through the thicket of thorns that is tearing at us and holding us back as we try and move towards serenity? Answers are so easy to give, and so hard to live!

There is, of course, a firm foundation on which we can build our search for peace. We can never find peace, serenity, a sense that all is well, unless we build on a foundation that is impregnable, that we know nothing can shake. As long as the foundation for our quest for peace is even a little vulnerable, peace will elude us, it will always be undermined by the nagging 'what if I lose it all...' that gnaws away at us. We must find a foundation that is truly unshakeable, that nothing can destroy. So it is clear that health, beauty, intelligence, material goods, pleasure, can never give us inner peace: each of them is vulnerable to loss, and at some level we can never forget that. In fact, there is only one thing that can be a solid and impregnable foundation, and that is the love of God. I am loved by him, and nothing can shake that, nothing can destroy that. Everything else is vulnerable, and cannot be a foundation for serenity: only God's beautiful, extraordinary, undeserved love for me will do. That is why there is no more important task for us than protecting that place within us where God dwells. Everything else that claims to be the foundation of our lives, the first and greatest value, is a fraud.

St Paul knew this very well. That is why he tells the Philippians to fortify their minds, to build up that tender place where God dwells within me, with all that is true, everything that is really human: noble, good, pure, loving and honourable, virtuous and praiseworthy. If we want to be apostles of peace; if we want to bring peace, even in the smallest of ways, into the lives of the people around us, we cannot do it from a place of agitation, or fear, or insecurity. We can only do it by placing our feet firmly on solid rock, on God's love. It is a scandalously generous love, intimate, gentle, unique to you, unstoppable. God longs to be our shelter, our shield, to protect us so that our souls can no longer be disturbed, no longer be anxious. It does require us to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to let him in, to stop trying to build ourselves on sandy foundations, to admit what it is that worries us and allow him to smooth it all away. There can be no peace, though, without this. He can only be our rock and our shelter when we stop trying to do it all for ourselves. Simeon, day after day in the Temple, placed his security and his safety in God; he was waiting to see that all would be well, and when this fragile little family walks into the Temple and fills it with a glory invisible to almost everyone else, and he knows that at last it will all be ok, his inner peace is made complete: *"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation"* (Luke 2.29-30). May God give us all the grace we need to be Apostles of Peace.