

Easter 6 C St Stephen's 9.30 & 11. John 14: 23-22.5.22

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.
I do not give as the world gives.” (v27)

A man was fed up with the upsets, fears and general dis-ease of modern life. He longed for peace and looked for a place to live that was safe and secure. So in 1980 he began his search for such a place. After two years he found it and moved there. Two months after he'd settled, the Argentinians invaded, landing in his back garden – the Falklands war had started.

The peace of which Jesus is speaking in today's gospel is not the absence of trouble or escape from worry. It is something far deeper, at the heart of our very being. This peace doesn't promise the end to troubles, but gives us the stability to rise above them, sustained by our faith through the gift of the Spirit.

We should never forget that faith is about a living relationship with the risen Christ. It is not some ideal towards which we continuously strive, but a relationship to be enjoyed and sustained day by day through our prayers, worship and fellowship.

Earlier in chapter 14 of today's gospel, Jesus promised his disciples that the HS will be their advocate and guide. “If you love me you will obey my commands; and I will ask the Father and he will give you another to be your advocate, who will be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth.” (v15-17). Then again, in chapter 16, he promises that the Spirit will lead them into all truth (v15). It is as we open ourselves daily to God in prayer that the Spirit is able to lead us.

It's all too easy to believe that we're open to God's guidance, when we're following our own course. A woman

had a teenage son who had no interest in Christianity. Every Sunday she would nag him to go with them to church. Every day, she would ask him: “have you said d your prayers.” She put tracts on his pillow and Bible verses under his lunchtime sandwiches. None of this worked.

One day, in despair, she dropped to her knees and prayer fervently that the obstacles preventing her son becoming a Christian be removed. There was a flash of lightning and she completely disappeared!

One of the problems we face all face in matters of faith is to think that what we believe is the gospel truth and that those who think differently from us are simply wrong, or at least misguided. I think this is often a common failing in matters of faith.

Writing about Islam, Brian Whitaker in his book “What’s Really Wrong with the Middle East?” says this: “Just as futile to counter religious arguments with secular ones and hope that people will be persuaded, so too with statements that lay claim to the “true voice” of Islam. Islamists and religious traditionalists do this all the time. When a scholar begins a sentence with the words ‘Islam says ...’ it is a sure sign that some particularly dogmatic statement is about to follow. The point of doing this is to claim a monopoly in rectitude; by asserting that the speaker’s view is the correct one and that anyone who disputes it cannot be a good Muslim. Such claims seek to shut down debate rather than open it up. (p396/7). We can legitimately substitute Christianity for Islam in this quote.

This attitude is simply arrogant, as if anyone is able to encompass the totality of God’s truth in our all too human brain. I think it was P.T. Forsythe who said: “We are often correct in asserting thee truths we hold dear, but wrong in denying the truth of others,” As Christians we are to be life-long learners.

If we are open to the Spirit, then he will call to mind the teachings of Jesus and especially when we are faced

with a dilemma or with temptation. All too often in the latter case we don't give ourselves time to listen. A churchwarden turned up at the vicarage to keep his appointment with the vicar, but it was his teenage son who answered the door. "I'm afraid he won't be able to see," he said. "He's just been offered the post of Bishop of the Bahamas." "But he's only just been appointed to this parish," said the churchwarden. "Yes, but he's been offered a car, six weeks annual leave and twice his present salary, so he's gone to his study to pray for guidance." "Is your mother praying with him?" No, she's up in the bedroom packing the suitcases." If we will only learn to pause and pay attention to the Spirit's promptings, guidance will be there.

The nature of this guidance and peace can best be illustrated by the story of Bernadette Power who lived in W. Belfast with her husband and 3 young children. As they went to church one Sunday, a gunman fired at them and mortally wounded her husband and nearly blinded her daughter. In spite of all this, Bernadette radiates the love and peace of Christ.

One morning her son Gavin asked: "Mummy, will the man who killed daddy go to heaven?" She offered a quick prayer and said: "If he is really sorry and asks Jesus to forgive him, then he will be welcome in heaven."

"Then I don't want to be in heaven if he is there," said Gavin.

Bernadette swallowed hard and offered another quick prayer, then replied: "But if he's really sorry and admits that what he'd done was a terrible sin and asks Jesus to forgive him, he'll be a different person in heaven."

"Then let's pray that Jesus will heal him," said Gavin.

What Jesus longs for is our trust and our love. But that implies one other thing – our obedience; and that is so often hard as we battle with our inner compulsions. This obedience isn't blindly doing what we're told, unlike the two young children who were being shown round their new school and the teacher emphasized the need to do exactly

what the staff told them. At that moment she saw an older pupil running down the corridor and shouted out his name "NEIL". The two infants immediately dropped to their knees!

As we open ourselves to God in prayer day by day, so the HS is able to transform us. Look back at your life. You are not the same person now that you were 10 or 20 years ago. We should be able to see how the Spirit has borne fruit in our lives.

As a young man I went dancing, and used to have dancing lessons, and though some Christians advised me to give it up, I didn't at the time feel as a Christian this was necessary. But over time, other interests and duties assumed more importance, and I found that I had a richer life, in spite of having given up an earlier interest.

Perhaps another way of understanding what Jesus is saying when he promises us his gift of peace, is to think of the word "consolation". It means to bring comfort to someone grieving or in trouble - to lessen the pain, and stand alongside another in their loss as a sympathetic presence, more willing to listen than to speak. As Jesus promised: "Come unto me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

It was just this need that led to the founding of the Samaritans. Chad Vara was struck by the comments of the Coroner at an inquest of an 18 year old girl, that if someone had only been prepared to listen to her, her life might well have been saved.

We are still in the season of Easter, and behind all our thoughts must lie the fact of the resurrection. We acknowledge this in the sursum corda: "The Lord is here; his Spirit is with us." In today's gospel Jesus promises that peace to us - "Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you." It is this peace that sustained Bernadette in her loss, and it can be ours. We shall only find that peace as we are open to God

daily in prayer, and allow the Spirit to work in our lives, for it is his gift which remains with us independently of circumstances and springs from our union with him. But we have to be ready for unexpected outcomes.

Some years ago, the Bible Society was working on a translation of John's gospel. The translators had got as far as John 14 and were looking for a word to describe the paraclete, the Holy Spirit, who is comforter, helper, & guide. They found the perfect word in the local culture. When a man collapsed exhausted when carrying a heavy load, and another bends down to help him up, he is known in the language as "The one who falls down beside us" – and that is exactly the work of the Spirit, who falls down beside us in order to lift us up to God.

D.L. Moody, the great evangelist, was asked whether he was filled with the Spirit of God., he replied: "Yes, but I leak a little!"

Three Christian brothers met one day
 To speak of things divine;
 They had so much of Christ to say,
 With joy their faces shine.
 The first one said, 'My brothers dear,
 By virtue of Christ's blood,
 My heart contains no guilty fear,
 I have "Peace with God.'

The second brother answered bold,
 'You lag on heaven's road;
 I grasp the truth with higher hold,
 I have the Peace of God.'
 Then third dear brother drew up tall,
 He laughed and scarce could cease;
 "My brothers dear, I beat you all –
 I have the God of Peace."

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They all had peace, they all were right,
But peace in diverse measure;
The third had scaled the highest height
Of heaven's exalted pleasure