

On the Spirit of Peace in a Conflicted World

Jesus summoned the twelve and sent them out with the following instruction: 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' Matthew 10.24-39

It is easy for us to think that because the value of *peace* is at the very heart of Jesus' preaching and teaching – because the 'peace of God which surpasses all understanding' (Philippians 4.7) is the gift bestowed in the final encounters between Jesus and his disciples after the resurrection –



therefore the whole of our Christian life will be filled not only with peace, but with a kind of *ease*. It is easy for us to think that the 'peace of Christ' means that *conflict* will cease. But we all know – and it is very obvious when we look at the state of the world – that the *opposite* is really the case.

How might we hold these two things together? That is to say, how can we hold onto the vision of the *peace of Christ* as something tangible and meaningful and real and true, but *at the same time* recognise the state of the world *as it is*, without evasion or denial?

Today's Gospel goes some way towards helping us understand this tension, which we experience as a *paradox*. Jesus has instructed his disciples to go out into the neighbouring villages and, first thing of all, to extend a greeting of peace to all those whom they meet, and to all those amongst whom they stay (cf Matthew 10.13, part of last week's Gospel). But Jesus knows very well that not everyone *is* a friend of peace. There are those who thrive on conflict, who have learnt how to take advantage for themselves of conflict between other people, or who are simply deeply conflicted within themselves. We all know these kinds of people – the ones who can't let grudges or resentments rest, those who like to prod sensitive emotional wounds. In today's Gospel, Jesus considers how we shall relate to people like this – the ones who will choose to be in conflict with us *whatever* we do or say, the people whose nature is always *contrary* – and especially when their reaction to us is the *opposite* of peace.

Right at the heart of Jesus' teaching is the importance of defying the powers of violence and destruction, precisely so that the cycles of violence and destruction can be *subverted*. It is what Jesus means when he invites us to *turn the other cheek* (cf Matthew 5.39). He has not promised that we shall not have enemies, because he knows that there are plenty of people who *despise* kindness and goodness and mercy, the values of the kingdom of God; and plenty more who are threatened by these values – who see them as a kind of *weakness*. Instead, he offers us a moral and spiritual frame of reference which will enable us to bear witness to peace even in the face of neighbours who may refuse to receive it.

In a profound sense, the *Passion of the Lord* is itself an embodiment of the willingness to be defined by peace in a world which has preferred to be defined by violence, and of being ready to pay the price of defying the powers, and repudiating the cycle of violence into which they desperately want to draw us in. It is perhaps this – the ability to stand firm in the face of violence and aggression, to *hold the line*, without being sucked into tit-for-tat retribution – is the ultimate fruit of having fully acquired the Peace of God in the first place. May it be so, and increasingly so, in you and me.