

Introduction

A few weeks ago we were having a discussion in our Thursday morning bible study about ecumenical relations (that is the relationship between different faith traditions) and a church in Jerusalem called the *Church of the Holy Sepulchre* came up. After this discussion I got curious and so looked into this church some more.

The church contains, according to tradition, the two holiest sites in the Christian tradition: the site of Jesus' crucifixion known as Calvary (Latin) or Golgotha (Greek); and the site of the empty tomb (the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea) where Jesus was buried and was resurrected. The church has been a major pilgrimage site since its creation in the 4th century.

However, control of the church has become very complicated over the last 150 years or so. Property and control is shared between numerous denominations including: the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Roman Catholic and to a lesser degree the Egyptian Copts, Syriacs, and Ethiopians. Protestants have no real presence in the church.

A decree called “Status Quo” was created in 1883 to halt the violence which had regularly occurred over control issues by defining who could do what and where – over things as minor as where a nail could be hammered into the wall or who would open the doors of the church.

This decree was not always effective. On a hot summer's day in 2002, a Coptic monk moved his chair from its agreed-upon spot to a place in the shade which was interpreted as a hostile move by the Ethiopians and 11 were hospitalized in the resulting violence.

Or the time in 2004 when a door to a Franciscan chapel was left open during an Orthodox celebration – seen as a sign of disrespect. A fist fight broke out and arrests were made.

Items in “common territory” could not be moved without everyone's consent so a ladder has been leaning untouched up against a window ledge since 1852 – since no consent for its removal could be agreed upon.

And no one controls the entrance to the church but in the 12th century a Muslim family was assigned door-keeping responsibilities and given the keys, which continue to be in Muslim control to this day.

What a place this is; the place where Christ was crucified and raised, where the Easter mystery was narrated - now a church - and yet it seems so inhospitable, divided, and cold. This place of Jesus' past is where some expect to find him again today, and to discover peace; so they posture and preen and even resort to violence to protect that which is so elusive in our world today, peace.

Our text for today gives us insight into the notion of peace that we all so fervently search for in our lives and that remains so obscure in practice.

Body of the Sermon

The Peace of the World

In our text, Jesus is just about to be arrested before his crucifixion. He was about to be executed in the most gruesome manner imaginable; to be tortured by the people he came here to minister to; to be humiliated and hung on a cross to die. And yet, in the face of all this, he tells his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.”

That sounds a little odd, coming from Jesus at a time when anything but peace was on the minds of almost everyone around him at that time.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.”

And today too we have been waiting 2000 years for Jesus’ return but peace seems a long way away. I found a website the other day called *wars in the world* which details how there are wars in 67 countries around the world today. It seems peace is not easy to come by today either.

And lest we forget, Zion Church is in the world also (perhaps not *of* the world but certainly *in* the world). We suffer the trials of life and a lack of peace, like any other community. It has not always been peace and harmony here either.

The Peace of Christ

What is this message of peace then?

This passage (“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.”) would be a really puzzling passage if Jesus had not continued his thought in the next sentence. He says, “I do not give you as the world gives”. Well, thank goodness!

God gives us his peace through the work of the Holy Spirit who pours itself out in us and through us. It is often a ministry of *small things*, small but sacred. The fact that our actions as a body of Christ seem quite ordinary and routine against the backdrop of life belies their deeper commitment to a life of service and of honouring life’s sacredness.

I was struck by an example of this a couple of weeks ago. As you are aware I am sure, there is a group of quilters who meets each Wednesday at the church. They met on Wednesday, but on Thursday a few of them walked back into the church. I was feeling a little *déjà vu* so I went in to see what they were up to. When I came into the room there were 2 boxes on the floor filled to the brim with quilts. “They are going to CLWR to be sent to those who need them” they said.

You see, the quilters group is not just a group of people getting together for a social visit, although there is a fair amount of socializing going on, they get together to serve. When I saw those boxes stuffed full of blankets I had this vision of a family over in Syria, or Iraq, or the Ukraine who had been

praying for a warm blanket to help them through the cold nights...and then God answering this prayer through the work of Zion's quilters.

This is the peace of Christ *in us* and *through us*. The Holy Spirit gives peace through our activities, we are involved.

Living under God's Peace

Further insight into how we are invited to live under the peace of Christ may be found in *1 Kings 14:9-18* – a passage we looked at last week in bible study. It is the passage where Elijah was in a cave hiding out from Jezebel and God tells him to go to the entrance of the cave because he wants to appear to him.

Just before this, in verse 9, God asks him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

To which Elijah responds, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

At this point God tells Elijah to go out to the mouth of the cave as he is about to pass by. Elijah hears earth shattering wind, but God was not in the wind; and then a deafening earthquake, but God was also not in the earthquake; a raging fire, but God was not in the fire; and finally a gentle breeze (or, as some translations would say, “silence”) and Elijah immediately went out to see God. God was in the silence.

This is a really popular text and very helpful for those building contemplative practice into their lives – seeing God in the ordinary parts of life, in the silence between the notes (the space between the bars). But, as we read further, there is another message too.

In verse 13, after meeting God in the silence, God asks Elijah the same question as he did in verse 9, before he showed himself to Elijah, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” God asks again.

And Elijah responds in exactly the same manner as he did after the first time God asked, word for word, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

It is an identical response. Nothing had changed in his response after seeing God in the gentle breeze or in the silence. There is something very profound in this.

It reminds me of an old proverb, “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.”

After hearing Elijah’s response God instructs Elijah to go back to the way he lived before this: He was to go back to the way he had come, he was to anoint people the way he done before, to live his life as he

had been living...and God would remain active in his life and among his people, and in fact saving 7000 of them.

So, this week, after delivering the quilts to CLWR, the quilters were back at their looms making more quilts...and God was busy again being God, saving, healing, loving...through us. *Wrapped up in the sacred mystery of being a part of the Body of Christ, we help God be God (!),* spreading God's peace through each other's activities.

I believe this peace that Jesus promises us is tied to the message of grace, which instructs us how to live. We are invited to go about our work in the world and helping others (quilting, making prayer shawls, serving at the Friendship meal, helping refugees, serving in this church in some wonderful way which expressed our individual gifts and callings), worshipping in *Word* and *Sacrament*, and being who we are called to be (or called to become) as the ground on which we stand gives way to the unbearable splendour of an active and loving God; whose activity of healing and grace fully engulfs and surrounds our lives – answering the prayers of the broken hearted feeding the sick, caring for the lonely or hungry...though us. We are simply invited to align our actions with God's love. We are invited to live, just live.

Do not be Afraid

To be realistic about this, living is not always easy work for us. Life has many trials and much suffering – we had 3 funerals here last week alone. In some ways we join Jesus' walk to the cross. Encountering God in our lives often resembles Jacob wrestling with God: wounds may result (Jacob limped for the rest of his life after that encounter). But to these trials, Jesus says:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.” (14:27)

What a comfort this is, and much needed; a reminder that we are never left to face the perils of this life alone. God himself walks with us, and the Holy Spirit within us. God weeps with us when there is sorrow, celebrates with us in our joys... and then reminds us of the day when he will personally lean over and wipe away our very tears (remember pastor Jeff's sermon last week).

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.” Can we truly hear this?

These are words of *covenant*. This is God's irrevocable promise which is reiterated over and over that we are God's children, that we have been summoned by name, that we are more precious than we dare believe, and through Christ we are redeemed. This gift is accessible to us and to all people.

Our Mission

So, how does this tie into our mission?

Perhaps our mission isn't really so much about evangelism as it is about helping those who are in need in real and tangible ways – like providing a warm blanket for a cold night – of being in conversation, sharing a meal, or sharing a story.

Closer to home, could it be that our task is to approach our communities in person and speak to and work with our neighbours until we discover from them what their needs are, and where we can best serve them; to learn from each other what God's mission of love and healing really looks like. There is healing in this activity, in our conversations, and the kingdom too.

And then together in this church too; I believe it is important that we hear each other's stories about how God is active in our lives, helping us recognize how the Holy Spirit in me is the same Spirit that lives and moves in you, in all people.

Conclusion

As I was working through this concept of God's peace, I thought long and hard about what the measure is of this peace. It is likely not that uncomfortable peace that exists in places like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

All the reflection and reading that I did while working on this sermon brought me to one conclusion - the measure of this peace is *joy*. It always comes back to joy. We should never push aside this joy.

It is a joy in knowing that we are redeemed sinners; it is a joy that wells up within us as we serve with open hearts; it is a joy of self-discovery when someone else helps us see the light of Christ that is in each one of us (in you and me); it is the joy that is mirrored from heaven whenever we repent for our failings.

True joy, the joy of Christ (alongside his peace), is hidden in our sameness; our fragility and humanness. It is the joy of belonging to the human family, redeemed in Christ, participating in each other's healing as friend, companion, and fellow traveler.

Yes, joy is the measure, and God's unending love for us is the backdrop.

Today is another day and another month. We only have so many May the 1st left to live in our lives, and so we are invited to just live, today. Hope, joy, laughter, meaning, and especially God's peace await us today. We need only turn your heads and discover it.

AMEN