

What is Peace?

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What is this peace we seek? Can negotiated agreements bring durable peace, or are they compromises in which neither party is satisfied, the product of competitive struggle for advantage and therefore tactical pauses in unremitting conflict? Is peace merely the absence of war, or is a product of love, of love of neighbour as ourselves? Is peace achievable without according to our neighbour that which we desire for ourselves?

What part, if any, does love of neighbour play in the new thinking Pugwash seeks to learn? Do science and scientists lead the way to this new thinking, or are they blind to intuition? Are they uncomfortable with the idea of love and unable to articulate its concepts, save in abstract slogans like, "Remember your humanity and forget the rest?" In their antipathy to religion, do they reject its lessons?

What follows is the text of a homily on Chapter 12:49-53, of the Gospel According to St Luke, in the Christian Bible. I delivered it in St Paul's Anglican Church, here in Westport, Ontario, Canada, on August 19, 2001.

What is this thing we call peace? We pray each Sunday for peace in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Kashmir, Macedonia, Colombia and wherever else there is conflict, imploring God to rein in the passions, damp the powder of warring armies, smooth the wrinkled front of grim visag'd war, succour the victims, and return the refugees to their homes. And yet the wars continue. Peace has become a name for war by other means.

Is God deaf to our pleas? Indifferent to suffering? Vengeful, as in his threats to the Israelites that we read in Isaiah? Are we being set up for Armageddon, as some believe? Will we die of thirst when the water dries out, of hunger when the crops shrivel and die, of asphyxiation when the air is no longer fit to breathe? Or are we barking up the wrong tree, asking for something God has never granted and which he has no intention of granting? Of something which he has no power to grant?

"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?" the Prince of Peace declares. "No, I tell you, but rather division." "I came to make people choose sides. A family of five, will be divided, with two of them against the other three. Fathers and sons will turn against one another, and mothers and daughters will do the same. Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law will also turn against each other."

We tend to pride ourselves on our efforts for unity, peace, and harmony, as frustrating as the search may be. We strive to bring peace to our personal relations, to our politics, to civil and ecclesiastical affairs. And so we should. The gospels, taken as a whole, are abundantly clear of the centrality of our call to the work of peacemaking. "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount.

What we need to understand is that treaties of human agreement are not enough. They are upheld only so long as they serve the purposes of the signatories, as we're now seeing in the case of the anti-ballistic missile treaty, which stands in the way of President Bush's

ambition to build missile defences. For the time being, such agreements are the best we can do, but they are not enough. The security they provide is temporary at best.

But today's gospel presents another face – a hard face – of that call. The peace we are called to make is not always sweet, for ourselves or for others. Sometimes it shatters our best-laid plans and burns up our fondest hopes. Sometimes its fruit is defeat and humiliation. This peace does not necessarily feel peaceful, but more like death by fire. The peace Jesus came to bring was the peace of God, not peace as humans define it. The difference is that human peace is basically a matter of compromise, of trade-offs. "I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine, and as long as this arrangement is mutually satisfying we'll avoid hostilities." The peace of God, on the other hand, is a matter of truth, integrity, and love: "I'll do this because it is the right and true and loving thing to do, not because of what I'll get out of it."

The peace of God is counter-intuitive: with it, there would be no nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, no need for the anti-ballistic missile treaty, no justification for national missile defence, no protracted and fruitless disarmament negotiations. We would disarm unilaterally, even if it made us vulnerable, just as Jesus made himself vulnerable, because it is the right and true and loving thing to do. We would beat our swords into plowshares and be done with them.

Except within families, where unconditional love may serve, trade-offs are the stuff of human relations. Our identities are built on the trade-off of playing a role in exchange for approval and status. For people suddenly to claim that they can build their identity on another foundation – namely, God's love – shakes the whole system of human relationships to its roots. Substitute "security" for "identity" and claim that it can be built on God's love instead of weapons and you invite humiliation and defeat. And yet there is abundant evidence that security cannot be achieved with weapons, as in the Middle East today. Gandhi, on the other hand, brought independence to India with self-sacrifice and a bag of salt. God's love CAN work, but it requires the courage of the Cross. That's more courage than most of us can muster.

Prophets are people who make such claims. In another prescribed reading, Jeremiah refused to participate in the patriotic project of bolstering the faltering confidence of the soldiers when Jerusalem lay under siege. He spoke the truth as he heard it from God, and the political leaders knew he had to be gotten rid of. His life was saved in the end, but not before he was physically abused and profoundly humiliated.

The supreme prophet, of course, is Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. His word of truth is cast upon us like fire, burning up every false foundation upon which we try to base our individual and communal identities. For casting this fire upon us, he was crucified. Neither then nor now can the powers that be permit the status quo to be confronted by the truth. His way requires that we relinquish every false unity, every merely human trade-off, every false identity, and take up the cross of love.

In his book, *The Blue Mountains of China*, Rudy Wiebe wrote:

Jesus says in his society there is a new way for man to live:
You show wisdom,
By trusting people;
You handle leadership,
By serving;
You handle offenders,

By forgiving;
You handle money,
By sharing;
You handle enemies,
By loving;
You handle violence,
By suffering.
Amen

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