

Homily on Peace by John Virgin Advent 1 – 2/12/18

The first candle we lit on the Advent wreath today, as we prepare for Christmas, is for Peace. When you listen to today's Gospel reading from Luke you might just numb it all out; all that apocalyptic judgement with disasters, distress and ending of the world. Or it could scare the hell out of you. Perhaps taking it literally you could become overly anxious, hyper alert to all the terrible things that happen in the world. Very depressing! It doesn't sound very peaceful, does it?

So what is peace? Of course it means the end of war. But can it also mean the absence of all fear or strife; or of worry about money, family, the future, etc.? Maybe not. Our two Morris windows up the front here give us a clue; with the war window on your right and the peace window on the left. We will have morning tea today up here in the Lady Chapel so you can compare both of them at you leisure and find the many symbols or emblems of peace in them. [I hope we won't disturb you there too much Grace!]

The same curly haired 18 year old young man Kenneth Wendt who was killed at the battle of Bullecourt in 1917 occurs in both windows. So this hints that peace includes, or is connected to both war and peace. [as well as eternal peace, Paradise of course]. The Jewish [and scriptural] term for peace is "Shalom". Shalom is used by them as a greeting and as a farewell; the opposites, hello and goodbye. Rabbi David Zaslow notes that: "In the Hebraic way of thinking, wholeness is the joining together of opposites . That's why we say "shalom" when we greet friends and when we wish them farewell. When I realize this, I feel "wholeness," and that is the source of peace – the knowledge that all my opposing energies are somehow linked and part of a single whole. True peace must have wholeness as its foundation."

When I was in Jerusalem in 1986 [on a pilgrimage] and trying to find my way to the "Western Wall", which the only remnant of the Temple destroyed in 70 A.D.; I asked a little middle-aged Jewish man with thick glasses and a yarmulke [skull cap] if he could point me in the right direction. Not only did he point me in the right direction but he took me all the way there. When we arrived he bid me "shalom aleichem" before he left. I asked him what that meant and he replied, It is a blessing like, 'may the **fullness** of God's peace descend on you like gently falling rain on the young green.'" I have never forgotten that, and I used that blessing so frequently in blessing patients in my years as a hospital chaplain.[I reckon by the way that Jesus is a little older Jewish bloke with thick glasses and a yamulke.] So there is more to Shalom than meets the eye.

Incidentally, at that same time we visited Jericho on the pilgrimage, and were shown around the excavated old walls of Jericho. I noticed a little bit of clay on the path that was about to be trodden into the path. So I stopped and picked it up. I recognized it straight away as a corner of one of the bricks from the wall. So I kept it, even though it was part of the older 1500 B.C.E. mud brick wall; and Joshua's wall that came tumbling down, would have been built [if at all] around 1200. Here it is see! But. What's that got to do with Shalom?

Well, I understand that; just before the Israelites began to invade the promised land and before they crossed the Jordan River opposite Jericho. And before the trumpets blew and the walls came tumbling down and total massacre and bloodshed and war began in the Hebrew texts; this is found in the Book of Numbers 6: "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, You shall say to them: The LORD bless you, and keep you; The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you shalom [peace]." So here we find again peace/ shalom, and war juxtaposed so that there is a link between them, as well as a contrast.

Hence an inner quality of peace can be present in us, even in the midst of turmoil suffering and war. True biblical shalom refers to an inward sense of completeness or wholeness; an inner completeness and tranquillity. In Matthew 5:9, Jesus comments, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Jesus is not referring to political negotiators, but to those who carry an inward sense of the wholeness and safety that is only available through son-ship with God. In the biblical Hebrew understanding of shalom, there is a point at which you have so much shalom that it spills out from you, and is repaid or rendered to others. And so, as you make others peaceful and inwardly complete, that makes you a peacemaker. 'But how in the hell do you get to that point, in ordinary every-day life?' I ask myself.

The first thing that comes to mind, is that shalom/peace is a gift of God, a grace of wholeness which we can pray for like Hanna; [even when sober and in great misery].

Also, as the Psalm today and others suggest, being honest with yourself in your feelings and prayers to God; even wishing disaster and pain on those who you detest. "Lord, God I hate those bastards! I wish they were dead!"; might not be the nice, proper, or the **right** thing to say. But the psalms show us how to open our hearts to God like this, is to be lead by God. This is the beginning of healing for us and an inner peace/shalom. [It is one of the first steps in AA which is the most successful program around that works.]

As Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is a prayer or hope for an increase of love for one another, and an awareness of what within us stops that and cripples us. Then we can address that perhaps. E.g., I might be so crippled and hurt by someone that I can't forgive them. But I can pray for the **desire** to forgive them. And it takes time; 70 times 70 times. Biblically, *shalom* is seen in reference to the well-being of others.

As a suggestion you might begin with someone a little distant at first like a politician you dislike; before someone closer to home with greater animosity or significance. E.g., I personally think that Tony Abbot is the most divisive and destructive politician in a generation. So when I think of him, I now often pray for peace for him, instead of getting annoyed. I imagine that his stooped shoulders can become more erect and he can lift up his head in peace within himself. like the crippled woman bent over that Jesus healed and told to lift up her head and stand up straight. I have to do this and forgive him many, many times. Even if there is no apparent change in him; I find this decreases my anger and dislike towards him and I become more peaceful and whole in myself.

And we can do that for ourselves too, by forgiving ourselves for some of the shameful things we may have done or said. Instead of cringing in shame I might try to forgive myself and even imagine myself straightening up and lifting up my head like that crippled woman. You might have other ways of course, to become peacemakers but starting within ourselves is a good beginning. And if we are intent on spreading peace; becoming a peacemaker remember the "Power of One:!"