

The World's Peace and God's Peace

Luke 12:49-56
August 19, 2007

I.

This is why the Episcopal Church has a lectionary. As a reminder, the lectionary is the book that appoints readings from Scripture that we hear each week. If today's readings were not assigned by the lectionary, I imagine that a lot of preachers would be talking about something else.

That's because these readings do not seem very reassuring, do they? In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, for example, God said his word is like fire, and like a hammer that breaks rock. The second reading from Hebrews tells of the persecutions that the prophets suffered. It said they "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; [and] they went about destitute, persecuted, tormented."

And then in Luke's Gospel, Jesus told us that he brought fire to the earth, and that he came to bring division rather than peace. He said households would be divided, father against son, mother against daughter, and so on. This story also is recorded in Matthew's Gospel, written several years earlier.

I would imagine that a lot of us came to church today for some quiet time, and some tranquility during which we could pray and worship. We might be here to seek peace from the burdens of the world, and then we hear Jesus say that does not bring peace, and comes to divide families.

II.

What's going on here? What happened to the love? Where is the Prince of Peace? This isn't the Jesus we heard about in Sunday School, is it? That's where we learned that Jesus was a gentle shepherd who performed healing miracles and proclaimed God's love for us.

At first glance these passages just don't seem to fit with some of our preconceived notions about Jesus. Was Luke having a bad day when he wrote this part of his Gospel? We know that Luke wrote his gospel about thirty to forty years after Jesus' death, perhaps later. Did he just forget about the kinder, gentler, more user-friendly Jesus?

And what about the Jesus who healed people, told them that their faith had saved them, and that they should go in peace? What about the Sermon on the Mount, when he said blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God? What about Paul who said in Romans (5:1) that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?

Can we say Jesus was exaggerating to make a point? Maybe he was speaking in metaphors as he frequently did. Can we explain this reading in one of those ways and still be faithful to Scripture?

The answers to these questions are that Jesus was not exaggerating; that he was not using metaphors; and that he was not being inconsistent. He was describing the reality of his ministry, not only in the culture of first century Palestine, but also for all time until God's kingdom fully is here.

We can see this, for example, in John's Gospel as Jesus spoke to his disciples the night before his death when he made an important distinction between God's peace and the world's peace. He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (14:27).

III.

So, there it is. The key is what Jesus meant by "peace." Sometimes we can confuse God's peace with worldly peace, which is entirely different, and somewhere in the middle also is personal peace; three different kinds of peace.

Let me mention the last one first; personal peace. I speculated earlier that some of us might have come here today seeking peace from the burdens of the world. And that certainly would be appropriate, because the church holds itself out as a respite, a sanctuary, from the trials and tribulations that exist beyond our doors.

We can have that kind of peace. Jesus wants that kind of peace for us. We know he died for our salvation, he left his Church behind as his body, and he called us to worship and to celebrate the Eucharist where he is present with us. Those things can bring peace to our hearts, and they are good. They do not describe the type of peace that Jesus rejected in the Gospel reading.

This brings us, then, to another type of peace, the world's peace. This is what Jesus rejected in today's reading. His ministry had nothing to do with the political or military peace among nations that was sought or imposed through national power.

In this respect, someone once said that peace is the interval between two wars. The world's bloody history has shown that to be true. Sometimes the interval lasted for decades, or even centuries, but it inevitably ended as a new conflict began. The context of Jesus' words made it clear, however, that he did not come merely to bring another such "interval." And the historical setting of the times created fertile ground for the seeds of division of which he spoke.

Let's look briefly at that history; the context for what Jesus said. Israel had been conquered about six hundred years earlier by the Babylonians, who shortly were defeated by the Persians. Then the Greeks conquered the Persians, and after that the Romans conquered the Greeks. And during these centuries the Jews remained a subjugated people. So during Jesus' lifetime the region of Palestine, which used to be Israel, was occupied by Roman armies and the people were governed by Roman leaders. The Roman boot was firmly planted on the Jewish neck, they had been oppressed for centuries, and it seemed they could do nothing to escape this fate.

As a result, Jewish hopes grew for a messiah to deliver them from persecution and poverty. And a common view was that the Messiah would be a military leader, a conquering hero who would use military power to drive the Romans from the promised land, and who would lead the Jewish people into establishing the glory of Israel that had been prophesied in Hebrew Scriptures centuries ago.

A messiah of that type probably would have united people rather than dividing them, don't you think? That kind of messiah probably would have brought families together rather than tearing them apart. Jesus, however, was a different kind of messiah with a different kind of message. He recognized that divisions and conflicts could arise among people who accepted him as he said he was, people who mistakenly hoped he would be something else, and people who rejected him entirely.

And, of course, we know the truth. We have the benefit of two thousand years of history, as well as the witness of Scripture that did not exist when Jesus was alive. We know that Jesus came to set in motion the divine plan that eventually will bring us to God's peace when God's kingdom is fully here. We know that while Jesus turned away from the temporary peace that comes with a strong army, his ministry proclaimed the eternal peace that that comes with a strong faith.

So we see that peace has several meanings. There is the world's peace that Jesus rejected. There is personal peace that we find in the church in communion with Jesus. And there is God's peace that is our hope as we await the completion of God's plan for his kingdom.

IV.

What does this mean for us? How can we claim this Gospel for ourselves? Hopefully we know that Jesus is not against peace, as such, but rather that he rejected secular ideas of the world's peace. Hopefully we know he wants us to have personal peace in our lives, and that through the church those experiences of personal peace will sustain us until God's peace arrives.

But it is not just a simple formula. We also know that in many ways Jesus was a revolutionary. This was essential to his ministry. Much of what he did and taught was designed to upset the *status quo*, both then and now.

For example, from readings and sermons earlier this year we heard how he calls us to change some of our ideas about our material possessions. We heard lessons about how our moral responsibilities are to be taken seriously. And now he tells us that his teachings will bring divisions within families.

This happened within Jesus' own family, and it can happen anywhere else. For purposes of faith, Jesus redefined families to be formed not by accident of birth, but by conscious choice.

This does not mean, however, that Jesus was anti-family. Clearly it does not mean that he wanted to destroy family relationships, or that family values were unimportant. Jesus simply recognized that division within families was inevitable where some people in a family accept him, and others do not.

So the point here is not much different from points Jesus made in earlier readings about what we do with our wealth, or how we take up the cross and follow him, or how we deal with the costs of discipleship. The point is that faith in Jesus takes priority over human relationships, and if our families do not accept him as Lord and Savior, we still must do so. We cannot let temporary earthly connections, no matter how personal, interfere with our eternal heavenly reward.

God wants everything we are and do to be under his calling to us. He wants to be central in all points of our journey through life. It is what Paul meant in Romans (12:1), and what we mean in Rite I of the Eucharistic prayer, when we offer our selves, our souls, and our bodies to be a living sacrifice to God.

And the church is here to help us. Through the church we can share a common life. Through the church we are united rather than divided as we partake of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Through the church we can know peace as we worship and thank God for our lives and creation. And through the church we can treat today's Gospel as a promise rather than a threat. As I have said before, I have never heard of anyone who, on their deathbed, wished they had spent less time in church.

V.

So, today's Gospel confirms two things. First, even though Jesus did not come the first time to bring God's peace in its complete glory, we know from Scripture that it will be with him in that way when he comes again. Second, because following Jesus transforms us and shapes our values, it also changes our patterns of life which, in turn, can affect our relationships with others.

But these costs are measured in temporary terms, while the gain is eternal. And if we are obedient and follow Jesus we will be blessed and will know peace, even if peace is not always around us in the world. *Amen.*