

9 May 2010
Easter 6C
Sermon notes

Rev Prof Garry Deverell

My Peace I Give You

Acts 16.9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21.10, 22-22.5; John 14.23-29

This week we've been hearing about the possible resumption of peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Peace talks are only necessary, of course, when there is no peace, when the parties in question have been at war. Peace talks are also, apparently, occurring between the warring parties of the UK. Right now, as we speak. Having ravaged each other's policies for the past four years, the lack of a clear victor in the general election has suddenly forced these former warriors to look for the 'common ground' on which an alliance or coalition may be founded. It has always struck me as rather tragic that a *negotiated* peace only become worthy of anyone's attention when no one entity proves strong enough to beat its rivals into submission. For peace, as our world more commonly understands it, is what you get when one of the playground bullies gets strong enough to impose his or her will on all the other kids. It is what the ancients called the 'peace of Rome', the peace that arrives not by conversation and the search for common ground, but by the capacity to cower those 'others' one perceives as the 'enemy'.

Thus, when in John's gospel Jesus bequeaths the gift of peace to his church, he does not do according to the pattern of domination we have been describing. The peace of Jesus is certainly *not* the peace of Rome. Notice, in John's text, that the language of obedience is drawn into a grammar of love and communal sharing rather than a grammar of violent consequences. He asks the disciples to obey his teaching not because they will be severely punished if they don't, but because of their *love* for Jesus. Remember that love, in the *Gospel of John*, is primarily defined by the sacrificial relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus does the difficult things his Father asks of him because he *loves* the Father. The Father asks what he does out of *love* for the Son and for the whole world. And Jesus asks his disciples to

love one another after the model of his own love for them, the love that is willing to surrender all pretensions at despotic power in service of the other and in crucifixion. So too, the Spirit is given to the disciples, in order that the Father and the Son may continue to guide and companion them into a genuinely peaceful future, a future that is already operational in this other-oriented love shared by the Father and the Son. The Spirit is *not* given to *bludgeon* the disciples into that future. The Spirit is given to gently teach the disciples the steps of love already being danced by the Father and the Son.

The *Revelation of John* provides the church with a wonderful vision of what God's peace would look like. Here the peace of God is like a city with a permanently open gate, where there is light both day and night, the light which comes from the living Christ, who is also (paradoxically) the lamb that was sacrificed for the sins of the world. Through the city runs a river of life, a river whose source is that same lamb. The river sustains the twelvefold fruitfulness of a tree of life so large that it is able to grow on both banks of the river at once. Its twelvefold nature suggests that the tree of life is the people of God, founded on twelve tribes and twelve apostles, fed by the Lamb and producing, what?, 'leaves which are for the healing of the nations'. For all nations, it seems, are present in this city. It is not a city for the strongest tribe, but for every tribe that looks to the Lamb for its light and sustenance. It is a city in which the former enmity of tribes and nations has been put aside for the sake of God's peace, the peace of the lamb that was slain.

Note that phrase please. It is deeply significant. For both John's gospel and the *Revelation to John*, the way to peace is certainly not by the sword of despotic bullies. Peace, rather, is the gift of a Lamb who is slain, a mighty warrior who is willing to lay down his great power for the sake of another kind of power, the power of love and of clear vision. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever cleaves to him in trust will not perish, but inherit eternal life, life in all its fullness. This is the paradox of the gospel of peace. Life and Peace arrive in the world not because the bully has scared everyone into submission, but because the sacrificial love of God in Christ takes root in people's hearts. Having been so deeply loved, our fear is taken away and we are enabled to love each other as well, even our enemies, so absorbing their violence into ourselves that their violence, and ours, dies with us as we also die with Christ in baptism. What is then raised from death, in the life lived in imitation of Christ's love, is the

possibility of a negotiated peace: a peace born of caring conversation, other-centred love, and the refusal to do violence to others as they would do violence to us.

The peace of Christ is not, therefore, a magical solution to an intractable cycle of violence. It is, rather, a political and ethical practise that is given us from the very heart of our Trinitarian God. Insofar as we take this practise to our hearts, John tells us, we shall also take to our hearts the very Spirit of God, in whom we are loved by the Father and the Son, even unto the end of the ages. In that sense, the church that practices these things is capable of becoming a sign of the peace which has not yet arrived in our world – God knows! – and yet, we are promised, is on its way according to the very concrete vision and practice that Christ has shown us.

Glory be to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – as in the beginning, so now and for ever. Amen.

Garry J Deverell
Easter 6, 201