

Not as the World Gives (John 14. 25-31)

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At Christmas, the church proclaims the birth of one who comes to guide our feet into the way of peace. But in a world continuously oppressed by war, riven by division, made turbulent by seemingly irreconcilable conflicts at every level and in every sphere, what does this proclamation amount to? Is it just some consoling fantasy or desperate hope? Does Christ's promised peace mean anything, change anything, in the world we actually inhabit? And if so, how?

In the last couple of weeks, we've seen that – on the gospels' account – the peace Christ is said to bring is richer and deeper than merely the absence of overt conflict, a state of 'tepid co-existence and non-interference'. Though clearly there are situations where tepid co-existence would be an improvement. A ceasefire in war, the detention of violent criminals, the restraining of perpetrators of domestic violence – all these are necessary steps towards peace in certain contexts. But if our peace never gets beyond this, if it's always about managing the ever-present risk of violence, then it seems an ultimately brittle or fragile thing. For without being founded in genuine relationality, care for the welfare of each other, and the sense that ultimately my own good is connected to the good of all, such minimal peace remains an essentially defensive or threatened state of being. It isn't fullness of life – for anyone.

The peace Christ seeks to bring is not reducible to this. It's about 'real engagement with others and mutual attention, giving and receiving'¹ – shalom. And where this richer peace does not exist, where there is no real 'community of interest and purpose between people',² Jesus' presence makes visible its absence. Think of

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God: peacemaking in troubled times* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, first ed. 1983, second ed. 2005), p.64.

² Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.68.

how his attention to and care for the cast out ones makes visible the cost of certain forms of social cohesion. And this gives rise to a tragic irony. Christ's work of reconciling all people necessarily requires unmasking the ways of securing a 'quiet life', a state of non-disturbance, that rely on suppressing certain voices or excluding certain presences. 'The tragic impasse', writes Rowan Williams, is that being compelled by a vision of radical human belonging and community [or peace] means being 'driven by this vision to rupture many of the forms of communal living [we] are already involved in'. And some of you know this very well in your own experience.

Jesus, then, is not associated with obvious harmony in the gospel tradition. He exposes hidden enmities and in fact provokes division – within families, communities, ultimately within Israel itself. And not only this. Williams offers the unsettling observation that Jesus is not obviously himself a peaceful person. 'The gospels do not present us with a figure marked by any evident serenity – rather with someone in important respects scarred by his own divisive role and painfully aware of the costliness of what he is doing ... He cannot spare men and women the effects of his presence: and he does not hold back his tears'.³ Jesus knows, as Simeon prophesied of him when as a child he was presented in the Temple, that he 'is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed' (Luke 2.34).

So Jesus does not float two feet above the ground in a state of meditative calm, pointing towards a pre-existing, unworldly harmony. Rather his passion for peace commits him urgently, sometimes impatiently, urging his contemporaries to see where their real peace lies and to embrace it, by learning to embrace each other. Ultimately, he falls victim to the latent violence he comes to expose. And all this suggests, that when Jesus says to his disciples, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you', it's not a promise of bland tranquillity, but a more dangerous gift which is itself a vocation; a vocation to create possibilities for peace in the midst of the world's violence and its resistance to real communion.

³ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.69.

But does this mean that his gift of peace is without any consolation or resource? Does it mean there's no 'felt' sense of being peaceful for those who follow his way? Does the peace of Christ condemn us, as it seemed to condemn him, to being at some level at odds with the world?

Well, here, there seem two things to say. First, it's true that the gift of Christ's peace cannot mean disengaging from the world's pain.⁴ It cannot be secured by refusing to reckon with the realities of history and tragedy; peace as a function of avoidance. And yet, though Jesus is not spared suffering the world's pain, it's also true that he is simultaneously tethered to something other, 'a perspective wider than the world itself'.⁵ This may be called the 'vision of God',⁶ an awareness of the nearness of 'the Kingdom', 'an anchorage, a firm point, a still pivot'.⁷ Writes Williams: 'Jesus sees the Father, sees directly and unwaveringly, even in terror and death'. And this, he goes on, 'we might indeed call peace – the fact of recognizing an affirmative and immovable centre',⁸ knowing God's faithful and loving regard. Jesus is 'at peace' 'because he is aware that no experience can sever his anchorage in this root of his existence'.⁹

But this is Jesus. What about us? Is this sense of anchorage, this peace the world cannot give, really available to us in the midst of our sorrow and travail?

Some of you will know of Sister Jane Keogh who lives just up the road here in Canberra. Sister Jane is a nun in the Brigidine Order, now in her late 70s, who has worked for years supporting and advocating for asylum seekers in indefinite detention on Manus Island and elsewhere. Recently, she shared this reflection which she has given me permission to share at Benedictus.

'On 24 April this year between 7am and 8am something happened to me that is inexplicable. It wasn't something I did or called for or expected. I don't know what

⁴ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.75.

⁵ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.80.

⁶ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.75.

⁷ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.78.

⁸ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.79.

⁹ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.79.

happened but I emerged from a dream. Something erupted inside me and opened up and spit me out into a new space. I felt different. I knew I was different. I wasn't the person who went to bed the night before.

'I had been quite some time in a place I did not like or accept, weighed down by the stresses and suffering of refugee friends and feeling powerless against the cruelty and injustices of today's world. Between 23 and 24 April and since, nothing around me changed. The same bad things, worrying situations continue, some close to home. I was, and am, still powerless to change them. But from 24 April, I am, completely unexpectedly, unreasonably, different. I felt I had discovered an alter person within me who I could completely rely on. A felt, gut experience, not from the mind or reason but of the inner spirit. Maybe I had discovered a spark of what some might call god, or the source of being, and it was not out there but was my own inner being, accessible to me within.

'I try to find words to describe it but I don't really feel a need to understand more than what comes to me. What I feel is calm, sureness, complete trust in the process, in my inner, light and shadow, self. In my days I have an awareness, a stillness, an acceptance'. Sister Jane speaks of how she still has her 'different moods and responses, fair days and better days'; she may feel 'shitty' or 'content' – but whatever is going on she finds herself able to accept herself without judging: 'I let myself be and am kind to myself. I am not waiting or expecting life to get better, to have a Cinderella ending to life's stories or a good end to the suffering and injustice close to me. The chaos is ongoing and outside, the strength and stillness is within'.

She goes on: 'Julian of Norwich's oft quoted words, "and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" always appealed to me. But I could never believe them. I no longer believe that a god will bring justice in a next life if not in this. But now I have a feel for the mystery that even while cruelty and deep suffering prevail, at some level a calm and a strength and happiness can be touched. How can this be? You can't just talk yourself into this, so where does it come from? Where did my new persona come from on 24 April? And how is my faith in it so unshakeable?'

This seems to be the peace we are talking about. Williams describes it as ‘not a state of *feeling* as we normally think of it, but a fact of union, constantly apprehended in fresh and surprising ways’.¹⁰ A fact of union, which enables us not to negate or avoid the suffering of life, but to be with it and bring to it an infinite compassion that ‘sustains us as we try to embody it’ (81).¹¹ This peace is given, not achieved; it’s accessible only by staying with the truth of things, letting ourselves face the world’s darkness and finding there, and nowhere else, the inextinguishable reality of love. A love born in the night and risen from the tomb, in which we too may come to dwell.

May the peace of Christ be with you.

¹⁰ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.79.

¹¹ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.81.