

The Things That Make for Peace (Luke 19. 29-44)

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‘If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes’ (Luke 19.42). There’s an aching poignancy about these words, this year more than ever. Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem and he weeps for the whole human family. In Luke’s gospel, as we saw last week, Jesus’ birth is celebrated as the in-breaking of God’s own peace. But now, it’s as if his hope of drawing people into it is fading. On the brink of his entry into Jerusalem, on his way to being violently cast out of the world, Jesus laments the city’s refusal of the gift he brings. ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ (Luke 13.34).

But how can this be? Isn’t peace infinitely to be desired? What is it that stops us recognising and being capable of ‘the things that make for peace’? What blocks us and gets in our way?

Last week, we began exploring the nature of the peace Jesus seeks to give. I suggested that his peace is richer than the mere absence of conflict. It has to do with right or restored relationships; it involves mutual accord and sharedness of life, where we do not live at each other’s expense, but are lovingly committed to the good of all. This is a peace (in Rowan Williams’ words) not ‘of undramatic, tepid co-existence and non-interference, but a peace which is free, active involvement, compassion, grateful receiving, generous offering, reciprocal enrichment’.¹ It’s a peace fulfilled in universal communion of which the church is supposed to be a sacrament. It cannot be secured by excluding an agreed upon outsider, by ganging up on the weak, the foreign, the despised. It’s achieved only through a process of

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God: peacemaking in troubled times* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, first ed. 1983, second ed. 2005), p.42. I am indebted to Williams’ reflections for much of what follows.

being reconciled to ourselves and each other, such that everyone is 'accepted sufficiently to relate to each other in love, gift and enjoyment'.² And by now, I guess, we're beginning to see why we resist this gift and find it so hard.

For the first step to making this kind of peace involves the disruption of false peace, illusory harmony, suppressed enmity. The true peace-maker can look at first like a trouble-maker, and this is the burden Jesus suffered. He says himself that he comes to bring not peace, but a sword (Matthew 10.34), that he comes to kindle a fire on the earth (Luke 12.49). In response to Jesus, human beings 'discover and decide the basic orientation of their thoughts and wants'. As Williams puts it, 'thus they unearth in themselves all kinds of hidden divisions and disunities'.³ They come to see the extent to which the supposed peace in their communities and families is founded on their refusal to hear certain voices or tolerate certain presences. And this is why, 'in all strands of the gospel tradition, Jesus is not a figure readily associated with peace in the sense of visible harmony'.⁴

For me, a vivid illustration of the way in which peace-makers can be branded trouble-makers was seen in some of the opposition to the Referendum on the Voice. The Prime Minister was said to be provoking or causing division in our nation, just by posing the question. As if prior to the asking of it, we were untroubled and at one; as if the mere absence of visible disturbance (at least in the lives of the majority), was a sign of national harmony and genuine mutuality. Or – to take a different kind of example – I've had friends who mustered the courage to speak up about abuse they suffered as children within their family, only to be condemned by relatives for 'breaking up the family'. The prophet Jeremiah railed against the corruption and injustice of ancient Jerusalem, the refusal of those in power to acknowledge the suffering of the least: 'They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying "Peace, peace", when there is no peace' (Jer. 6.14). The first step in making true peace is the disruption of false peace and the uncovering of hidden enmity.

² Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.71.

³ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.67.

⁴ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.67.

Then comes the work. Last week, I said the peace Christ gives is not a steady state, not a once-for-all deposit of undisturbed tranquillity, or the uncovering of a pre-existing unity. Rather it's a road to travel, a way, a practice that draws us ever more wholly into loving relationship. Williams again: 'We need to grasp in penitence how we have co-operated in fragmenting a world called to unity'. To be reconciled in such a fragmented world, 'does not mean scraping away divisions and distinctions to find an equality "under the skin", but committing ourselves *in* our diversity to the creation of new and mutually enriching patterns of interaction'.⁵

How do we do that? We can recognise habits of being that block the emergence of new patterns. The need to be right all the time; the need to be in control; attachment to identity defined against others; greed; fear; shame; making victims and cultivating victimhood; self-deception; falsity; pride; bitterness; cynicism. And we can commit to learning different habits of being: compassion, kindness, mercy, patience, forgiveness, attention, listening, truth-telling.

Making peace involves discernment. It emphatically doesn't mean rolling over and letting someone trample on you for the sake of a quiet life. It doesn't mean agreeing to suppress the experience of injury and trauma, or ignoring the impact of history, politics and the exercise of power. Such suppression is just more of the illusory peace, the hidden enmity that Jesus comes to expose. 'If our historical actions have created a divided world', Williams writes, 'our historical actions, our choice and speech and imagination, must create a world of positive mutuality'.⁶

Peace-making, then, is an active state of being, a ministry of reconciliation. And it involves risk. When we risk disrupting the quasi-peaceful status quo, we don't know where the journey will lead. In her poem, 'Making Peace',⁷ Denise Levertov beautifully expresses the vulnerability of the peace-maker:

But peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,

⁵ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.68.

⁶ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.68.

⁷ Denise Levertov, 'Making Peace' from *Breathing the Water*. Copyright © 1987 by Denise Levertov. Thanks to Sarah Legrand for sharing this poem with me.

can't be imagined before it is made,
can't be known except
in the words of its making,
grammar of justice,
syntax of mutual aid.

A feeling towards it,
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have
until we begin to utter its metaphors,
learning them as we speak.

And the truth is, sometimes we're not there yet. We don't have the energy. A wound is too raw, as yet impossible to contemplate reconciling or integrating. A conflict is too hot, our sense of ourselves too destabilised, to enter into speech, dialogue, negotiation, mediating action. Sometimes the best we can manage is a truce, a cease-fire, a retreat from the fray to mourn, to allow time to recover ourselves, discern our truth, begin to heal. Denise Levertov goes on:

A line of peace might appear
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,
revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,
questioned our needs, allowed
long pauses . . .

And in the end, what the gospel proclaims is that we cannot make this kind of radical peace out of our own resource. The peace Christ comes to enable is not the same as the world's peace; it's 'an order of peace quite different from the "quiet life" we may long for'.⁸ Making it requires us to dwell where Jesus dwelled, in communion with him in the heart of God. 'For he is our peace', St Paul insisted (Ephesians 2.14), and he has made his peace available to us by entering into the heart of the world's

⁸ Williams, *The Truce of God*, p.70.

violence and unmaking it from within. This is where we must follow if we are to receive his gift. How this is so and what it means will be our focus next week.

For now, let our poet imagine its advent as we wait upon it.

A cadence of peace might balance its weight
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,
an energy field more intense than war,
might pulse then,
stanza by stanza into the world,
each act of living
one of its words, each word
a vibration of light—facets
of the forming crystal.