

God's Peace

Readings: Ephesians 2: 14-18

John 20: 19-23

In the New Testament the word for “peace” is “eirene”, like the name “Irene”. Back in the Old Testament the Hebrew word is “shalom”, which of course is still a greeting between Jews today. When Jews say “shalom” to each other, they mean: peace in themselves, peace in their relationships with others, peace with God, wholeness, completeness, wellbeing, wealth and physical safety. “Wonderful,” you may say. Or you may say, “It’s all too wishy-washy, too nice. And, anyway, what’s the point of saying that to each other, except to be nice?” Well, of course, it’s actually a prayer; Jews are asking God to bring “shalom” to the people they are greeting.

God is very much part of this greeting, and the nub of the prayer is that the person will find peace with God, spiritual peace. All the rest - wellbeing, contentment, good relationships with others - flows out of that basic finding peace with God. We take it for granted that God wants to bring us peace with himself - and He does - but the Bible claims that our natural situation gives us no peace with God. Because of sin, choosing to live our way rather than God’s, we have no peace with God; we are separated from Him, cut off from Him, alienated from Him. The opposite of peace is enmity, war, hostility. Well, we aren’t in a state of war with God, but there is certainly hostility and enmity unless we accept his offer to bring us peace with Him. That means that peace isn’t a nice, wishy-washy idea; it’s something much more real: it’s putting things right with God, breaking down a barrier between us and Him. In the Jewish religion the original sacrifice of an animal was called a peace offering, from the same word as “shalom”; in other words, the aim of the sacrifice was to bring peace between us, and Him, when otherwise our

sinfulness would separate us from God. The Hebrew root for both “shalom” and “Peace offering” is “shawlam”, which means “to be completed”, “to be safe”, “to make amends”, “to make good”; ie it’s because God stepped in and made a way to bridge the gap between Him and us that we can have peace, feel safe, be complete.

Similarly, in the New Testament the root for “eirene” is “eiro”, meaning “to join”, ie we can only be joined back to God because of Jesus who, we are told, is our peace. Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.” Without Jesus, then, there is no peace between us, and God. We can’t take God’s favour for granted; we need to accept Jesus’ offer of peace with God, the offer He can make because of his peace offering for us in the Cross.

All this makes the idea of “peace” much stronger and something very real. It’s that deep sense that things will be OK because I have invited Him into my life. And it is often despite what is going on in the world. The night before He was crucified Jesus said, “I have told you these things so that you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). God’s peace means hanging on to our faith in a storm when everything is shaking and things are falling apart.

It’s only knowing, this rightness with God that we can begin to be right with each other; we are all alike in being silly and sinful, but forgiven! In our service we usually, but not always, have The Peace later on in the service ie after the Confession when we put ourselves right with God, and after we’ve had a chance to listen to God speaking to us in the rest of the service, especially the Bible readings and the sermon. Also, it comes before the Offertory hymn; Jesus tells us, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against

you, leave your gift at the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother (Matthew 5:23).

When we greet each other in The Peace we are acknowledging each other, and acknowledging that we belong to God together, and therefore that we belong to each other and need each other. We are also praying for each other as we say, "Peace be with you." I'm not a huggy person at all and used to find even a handshake for The Peace embarrassing, but understanding it more helped me get over my embarrassment. I know some of you find it difficult too because you have told me so. If so, just sit down and look up the hymn! But maybe, like me, you need a small prod to begin to acknowledge those around you. It's making yourself vulnerable a little. And if you don't know someone's name, ask them. If we're God's children, let's be secure in that and not mind risking looking silly by asking someone's name when we feel we should know it already!

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