



Peace Sunday

15 January 2023

The World Peace Day theme chosen by Pope Francis will be on the Pax Christi website as soon as it is announced.

www.paxchristi.org.uk

Promoted by Pax Christi with the support of the International Affairs Department
Catholic Bishops' Conference, England and Wales

The 56th World Day for Peace will be observed in England & Wales on 15 January, 2023, the 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A). The readings for the Sunday Eucharist are Isaiah 49.3, 5-6; Psalm 39.2, 4, 7-10 (resp. vv. 8-9); 1 Cor 1.1-3; John 1.29-34.

Introduction to the Liturgy

The Bishops of England and Wales invite us to make today a day of prayer for peace and to reflect on the theme chosen by Pope Francis for the annual *World Day of Peace* (yet to be announced). Much has changed in the twelve months since we last celebrated 'Peace Sunday'. War returned to our continent last February with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Then in November the COP27 talks in Egypt brought new focus on the existential threat that climate change brings to many communities - especially the poorest - due to deforestation, desertification, extreme weather events and sea-level rise. Present conflict and the prospect of future conflict both lie before us as we begin a new year. All the more reason, then, to proclaim Christ once more as Prince of Peace and to entrust our world to his mercy.

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world:

Lord have mercy.

Christ Jesus, on whom the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Peace, descended at your baptism:

Christ have mercy.

Lord Jesus, proclaimed by John the Baptist as the Chosen One of God:

Lord, have mercy.

Introduction to the Readings

First Reading (*Isaiah 49.3, 5-6*)

We hear from one of the 'Songs of the Servant' in the second section of the Book of Isaiah. It is really our song. We, too, are called to let the Lord be our strength, to know our calling to gather the scattered and to be a light for the nations so that God's Salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

Second Reading (*1 Cor 1.1-3*)

What is our prayer for our world at the beginning of another year? Surely it is grace and peace, a grace and peace which, as St Paul tells his Corinthian hearers, is already given to us as 'the Holy People of Jesus Christ'.

Gospel (John 1.29-34)

A prophet is not someone who sees the future but someone who sees the reality before him or her and names it. Thus John the Baptist, that fiery desert preacher; sees the truth about Jesus: sees the Lamb of Sacrifice who frees us from Sin; sees also the Dove descending, sign of the presence of the Spirit, the bringer of peace.

Homily Notes - First Reflection

Dear friends, let us risk the dangerous dream of peace, proclaiming its possibility, conceiving of the healing of the conflicts which divide our world and divide also our own hearts. Let us give up on disappointment and a resigned acceptance of 'the way the world is' as an inevitability. Let us take utterly seriously the greeting sent by St Paul to his friends in Corinth nearly 2,000 years ago: '*May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send you grace and peace*'. Amen to that! But what would it mean, to embrace this gift? What would have to change in ourselves and in others? How would the world have to change to bring this about, and how would such peace change the world?

It may help to use our imagination here, rather than simply deducing the steps that might lead us from active conflict to the ending of division. Let us make ourselves still right now so that we are ready to receive these great promises, these great gifts of grace and peace ...

Become aware of your body and your breathing. Settle yourself down ready to welcome them: *grace and peace*. Cup your hands ready to receive them: *grace and peace*. Imagine them descending like the dove in today's Gospel: *grace and peace*. Where do they come to rest? Where in our minds, our bodies, our stories do they come to dwell? Where are we most in need of them right now?

Just conceiving of that descent of grace and peace into our hearts, our lives, our relationships, already makes a difference in our bodies, releasing tension, renewing our hope. Simply by allowing for the possibility that our lives might be lived under the banner of grace and peace and might become signs of the same two qualities - *grace and peace* - our being is changed and our destiny is changed.

And, while we are in a place of stillness, let us imagine also what qualities would be needed in a true peacemaker. Maybe our psalm today can be our guide. The refrain gets us to the right starting-point: '*Here I am, I come to do your will*': on the one hand, the ability to be present in the moment, rather than torn and distracted - here I am; on the other hand, an opening of the heart, a desire for my life to be about more than myself. This is what the psalmist calls '*waiting for the Lord*', an encounter which begins to change my way of thinking and my way of speaking. '*He (the Lord) put a new song into my mouth, praise of our God.*' To be peacemakers we have to be people whose words build up rather than pull down, bearers of hope who refuse to indulge in lazy cynicism.

The peacemaker is also someone who listens: '*You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings, but an open ear*'. Yes, that means listening to the Word of God, but it also means listening to the reality in which we live, listening especially to the cry of the poor and the excluded, the uncomfortable voices of pain, even to the voices of those we call 'enemies'. Why do they fear us? Why do they, even, sometimes hate us? Before we can hope for peace we must be capable of facing whatever shadow prevents our meeting with our brothers and sisters in a place of light, be that the burden of history or the weight of current unjust structures (both theirs and ours).

Yet, alongside listening, something more is needed, a willingness to speak up for justice and to speak out against oppression. The way to peace of heart, even though it may seem to drag us into fields of conflict, is to be able to say what the ancient poet confesses: '*Your justice I have proclaimed ... My lips I have not sealed*'. God's justice, not my justice; God's vision of the world's flourishing, not my little plans and projects and prejudices.

'*If you want peace, prepare for war,*' the ancient Roman general Vegetius once wrote. But all our preparations for war across many generations have not brought us peace. It's time to correct that old trope, at least for Christian believers. If you want peace, put yourself at the service of God's grace: wait for the Lord; sing the new song of hope which is rooted in the Gospel; learn to listen to those we have learned to ignore - especially the voices of the poor and excluded, but even the grudges of our enemies, to try to understand our conflicts better; and, in the last resort, refuse to fall silent. Speak up for justice and against oppression, but without rancour or hate. Let grace and peace be at the heart of all we do and say. Amen.

Homily Notes - Second Reflection

Which John the Baptist do you prefer? There's the wild man of the desert, dressed in his camel-skin cloak and eating honey and locusts in Mark, the fiery preacher denouncing the 'brood of vipers' in Matthew, the cousin of Jesus who grows into a rather milder dispenser of ethical guidance in Luke.

Perhaps the Baptist was all of these things. In any case, as so often, the Fourth Gospel offers another slant. He is just as clear as any of the other evangelists that John is the Forerunner of Jesus. *'He came as a witness, to bear witness to the light.'* (Jn 1.5) And the same quotation from the prophet Isaiah is deployed: *'A voice of one that cries in the desert, prepare a way for the Lord'*. (Jn 1.24) He also points to *'the One who is to come'* who will be so much greater than he. But there is another quality in John's Baptist. He is the one who sees the Spirit coming down on Jesus, understands him as *'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'*, and redirects his own disciples to follow a new master.

We still need all those different John the Baptist types in the Church today. We need the ones who are willing to risk seeming eccentric because of the radical ways in which they live - the people who consistently think about where their food comes from, about who made their clothes, about the impact on the planet of their own lifestyles. (And maybe locusts and other insects really are part of a future sustainable diet ...). We need those who speak out forthrightly when they see injustice. We need people willing to wrestle with the ethical issues of our day and to offer answers to others' conscience-stricken enquiries: 'What must - indeed, what CAN - I do?'

But perhaps our greatest need is for people who are on the look-out for the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Sixty years ago, Pope John XXIII directed the Catholic community to be people who look for the Signs of the Times - the places where the Holy Spirit is bringing new life and where fresh fruit are growing and ripening, perhaps in the most unpromising circumstances. His list back then (in his great letter, *Pacem in Terris*, written in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis) highlighted the increased attention to workers' rights, the advancement of women in society and the legitimate aspirations of previously colonised people to seek their own development as independent sovereign nations.

Times change. Our own list might well be different today. Clearly, concern for the environment has ridden right to the top of the agenda for many in the light of the global climate emergency. The general global move against the death penalty (which was still on the statute books in the UK 60 years ago) is another 'Sign of the Times', broadening our understanding of what it means to be 'Pro-Life'. A third, related shift in Catholic teaching is the increased insistence that warfare is no longer acceptable as a means of resolving international disputes.

At the time of the first Gulf War in 1991 Pope John Paul II called war-fighting *'an adventure without return'*. He also insisted that violence never resolves problems but is a lie, *'destroying the very things which it claims to defend: human dignity, life and liberty'*. It is sufficient to look at the situation in Ukraine after nearly a year of fighting to realise the futility of war-making. For what has it brought about, other than 100,000 casualties on each side, millions of refugees forced from their homes, innumerable broken hearts and many billions of pounds' worth of damage to infrastructure? Pope Francis has called war *'a madness, the suicide of humanity because it kills the heart'*. He also describes regional conflicts as *'a Third World War being fought piecemeal'* and the arms industry as *'the greatest calamity in the world,'* because it diverts resources from fighting poverty and disease.

Gradually, the creative power of nonviolence has been rediscovered in recent decades, both in the Catholic community and beyond. From the civil rights movement in the USA to the quiet work behind the scenes to bring about reconciliation in Northern Ireland and other conflict zones; from the dismantling of the Berlin Wall without a shot being fired to the ending of Apartheid in South Africa - the possibility of a different future and a different path to attain it have been glimpsed. So now, as two thousand years ago, we have need of prophets like John the Baptist in today's Gospel - men and women who see the dove descending, who read the Signs of the Times and who, like the Baptist, speak out: 'Yes, I have seen and I am the witness that he - the one we acclaim as Prince of Peace and the bringer of Reconciliation to our broken world, the one who refused to hate - is the Chosen One of God'.

Prayers of the Faithful

You may wish to include one or more of the following intercessions.

Priest: It is Christ who is the Light of the Nations, and he asks us to bring that light to places of shadow and darkness. Let us pray for ourselves and for the world in which we are his witnesses. The response to each intercession is: **Christ, be our light.**

That Christ may open our eyes to see where the Spirit is at work in our world today, opening up new paths of peace and hope.

Let us pray to the Lord: **Christ, be our light.**

For our own homes, our families, our parish community; that the grace and peace Christ came to bring may reign over us, so that the stranger may find welcome and those hurting may find comfort in our company.

Let us pray to the Lord: **Christ, be our light.**

For all Christians, that we may recognise that it is the same Gospel that we hear, the same Lord that we worship, and the same peace to which all are called. For God's blessing on this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity... and for the ministry of Pope Francis as a servant of communion.

Let us pray to the Lord: **Christ, be our light.**

For our political leaders, that they may seek to find a shared understanding and achieve reconciliation in the face of divisions of every kind. And for our nation, that we may work to achieve a just peace across the world.

Let us pray to the Lord: **Christ, be our light.**

For a rejection of violence as a solution to human conflict: We pray especially for a negotiated end to the war between Russia and Ukraine, and the many forgotten ongoing conflicts of today - in Yemen, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iran...

Let us pray to the Lord: **Christ, be our light.**

On this Peace Sunday, we pray for all who work, whether locally or internationally, for peace and justice; for all who will not be silent in the face of injustice or suffering; for all who take risks for peace. We ask God's blessing today especially on the work of the international Catholic peace movement, Pax Christi.

Let us pray to the Lord: **Christ, be our light.**

Let us commend to God's mercy all who are unwell (especially.....) that they might be restored to health; and all who have died (especially.....). May they dwell for eternity in the light of God's face.

Let us pray to the Lord: **Christ, be our light.**

In a moment of silence, let us place before the Lord our own thirst for peace.

Final Prayer: Father, as the Spirit descended like a dove on your Son at his baptism, so grant that the same Dove of Peace may open up paths to a just peace for all in our world today. To you we make these our prayers, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.