

Truthful peace

One of the great regrets of my life is that I was too young to be a hippy. In ‘the Summer of love’ of 1967 I was just a schoolboy - I know you find it hard to believe that I was alive at all in 1967, but I was – but sadly I was too young to grow a beard, and I always wish I had been that bit older and able to get into the whole flower-power scene, as it was known. It was an exciting time when young people really believed that love could save the world and that peace was possible and war could be eradicated. One of the legacies of the hippy era, along with some fantastic music, was what was known as the ‘Jesus freaks’ or the ‘Jesus people’. This was a fairly short-lived phenomenon of the early ‘70s, found especially in California and featuring people for whom the hippy ideal found embodiment in Jesus, the original peace freak. And I imagine that for the Jesus people Luke’s Gospel would have been required reading. After all, in Luke’s presentation of Jesus, ‘peace’ is one of his buzzwords. In the early birth narratives people who speak of Jesus find the peace word blossoming upon their lips. Old Zechariah the priest in the temple prophecies that Jesus will be the one ‘to guide our feet into the way of peace’, and the angels in the skies above the shepherds’ fields of Bethlehem sing of his birth with the proclamation of ‘peace on earth’, and old Simeon in the temple who has waited and longed to see God’s Messiah looks upon Jesus and knows that now at last he can depart this life - in peace. And as we read on through Luke we hear Jesus bless the sick and the broken and the outcasts as the words, ‘go in peace’ ring in their ears, and Jesus’ disciples are sent out with a message of peace. And this is such good news for us today. It is good news for no less than in the ‘60s and the ‘70s the world today is a violent and brutal place and the noise of conflict clamours around us and we are stressed and troubled people who yearn and long for peace in our world and in our lives. And how wonderful to follow a Jesus who offers it.

That is why we feel such a jolt when we read these verses from Luke this morning. How disturbing to hear the words, ‘I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already

kindled... Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No, indeed, I have come to bring dissension.’ And Jesus goes on to speak of division and conflict tearing families apart and oh dear, we find this embarrassing. What happened to Jesus the peace freak? If any of Jesus’ disciples were by any chance proto-Californian Jesus people then they would doubtless have described it as a ‘bummer’ to hear him talk like this. There is nothing very attractive and appealing about this Jesus. Is there not, after all, quite enough conflict in the world without Jesus adding to it? And wasn’t he supposed to be the Prince of Peace?

Well maybe the problem here is not so much that Jesus is against peace, but that he is aware that not all peace is real or true. Maybe he is aware that there is such a thing as a superficial peace which makes life easier but which actually is not authentic peace at all. Maybe he is aware that there is such a thing as a false peace that simply allows us to avoid things we would prefer not to confront. And maybe above all he is challenging the assumption that real peace is incompatible with conflict and dissension. And what I would like to do here this morning is to briefly explore three kinds of peace, only one of which is worthy of the name.

So let’s start with the first kind of peace that brings comfort and reassurance, but only because it covers up the truth. To put it bluntly, it is peace that is founded on a lie because the truth is far too troubling and unsettling. I think this is what Jesus is getting at addressing when he accuses the people of being able to read the weather but failing to read the signs of the times. These people are facing a crisis in their national life. Their whole future is in jeopardy but the truth is too disturbing, the signs are too troubling and it’s easier just to bury their heads in the sand. It is what we find too in today’s reading from Jeremiah. The situation here is that the people of Jerusalem, as in Jesus’ day, are in grave peril. They are facing immanent invasion and destruction and exile. And what are the prophets saying? Are they telling the people the truth? Are they reading the signs of the times? No way. Listen again to what God says, ‘I have heard what the prophets say, the prophets who speak lies in my name; they cry, ‘I have had a dream, I have had a dream!’ How much longer will these prophets be minded to prophecy lies and give voice to their own inventions?’ These prophets were liars.

They were telling people that everything was going to be OK and there was nothing to worry about. Listen to Jeremiah just a few verses back:

‘Do not listen to what is prophesied to you by the prophets,
who buoy you up with false hopes...

They say to those who spurn the word of the Lord,
‘Prosperity will be yours;
and to all who follow their stubborn hearts they say,
‘No harm will befall you.’

These prophets were proclaiming peace and prosperity when they were in fact in the greatest danger. They were proclaiming an easy, false peace that hid the real truth of what was going on because it was too disturbing. And that is always a danger with peace, that it heals wounds lightly by covering them up.

Take a current, obvious example. As we all know, recent months have seen an ecological disaster in the Gulf of Mexico when millions of tons of oil have poured into the ocean with calamitous consequences. That disaster reinforced pressure to begin seriously to consider alternative energy strategies, to recognise that current consumption of oil is becoming too dangerous to be sustainable. But now there is good news. Reports tell us that only about a quarter of the leaked oil now remains and the rest has all been cleared up, broken up or evaporated. In other words, it’s alright, it’s going to be OK. We can handle big oil spills, they’re not that dangerous and that eases the pressure for change. The crisis evaporates like the spilled oil. Now I know nothing and maybe this is all true and we can rejoice, but when it comes to big business I am sceptical. I am wary of spin. This smacks to me of the prophets of Jeremiah’s day: ‘prosperity will be yours... no harm will befall you’ and I fear that the full truth is being hidden under the cloak of a false peace.

But then secondly there is also the peace that is based on tolerance. Tolerance is of course one of our great contemporary virtues. There is no greater sin than intolerance. We live after all in a society where we are very aware of difference – we live side by side with people from different cultures, people with different faiths, people of different sexualities etc. How can we live together in peace? Well, the answer is by tolerance. Now that sounds very enlightened and progressive but I wonder if there is a danger here

that tolerance is just a strategy for avoiding conflict and struggle. The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent some time studying in America and he had some interesting reflections upon American religious and political life. He pointed out that the Protestant fugitives who fled to America in the seventeenth century did so to escape religious conflict and strife. They had had enough of struggles over creeds and confessions and therefore, suggests Bonhoeffer, 'for American Christianity the concept of tolerance becomes the basic principle of everything Christian.' Here tolerance becomes a strategy for avoiding conflict, and if there is any truth in that then it will apply beyond the United States. We all want to live in peace. Our world is violent enough and so tolerance becomes the great Golden Calf of a liberal society. The problem is what kind of peace is established this way. To take a contentious example, I am not a gay or transgendered person and I hesitate to speak for those who are, but it seems to me that gay and lesbian and transgendered people do not want to be tolerated. They want the full truth of who they are to be revealed and recognised and that may involve real struggle and conflict for all – straight, gay and transgendered alike. It may provoke dissension. But wherever we may find ourselves as a result of that struggle, even if our views only end up being reinforced, we are surely all changed, transformed, enriched by going through it. What emerges is not necessarily agreement but a deeper peace.

That brings me to the third kind of peace, what might be called truthful peace, peace worthy of the name. The best example I can think of for this is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was set up in South Africa in the mid 1990s after the end of apartheid. Here harrowing stories were told of the most appalling crimes. Here people confessed to terrible things they had done and that brought the deepest pain to the surface. But out of it came a peace that was founded not on lies and not on tolerance but on truth, forgiveness and reconciliation. That is a far, far harder road to walk but it leads to a more hopeful place.

Here then we encounter the reality of Christ's peace. The peace of Christ is not an easy peace. Jesus comes to tell us uncomfortable truths about ourselves and our world. Before he is a peace-maker he is a truth-teller and that profoundly affects the kind

of peace he brings for the truth provokes dissension and struggle and conflict, and it prompts confession. Forgive my indulgence in quoting the words of the incomparable Bob Dylan which are found on the cover of our order of service this morning, but as he puts it: 'Peace will come in tranquillity and splendour on the wheels of fire, but will offer no reward when her false idols fall...' This is true peace. This is the peace that comes only after the signs have been read and the truth faced. This is the peace that comes only after the fires of struggle and dissension have been kindled. This is the peace that comes only after the false idols of an untruthful peace have fallen. It is the peace that comes to my heart only after 'the Lord did trouble me', in the words of the song we heard earlier. And it is the peace that comes only when, after being disturbed and troubled and exposed, we are finally embraced by forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is the peace of Christ. This is the Gospel of Christ.
Praise to Christ our Lord. Amen.