

HOLY WEEK MEDITATION ON PEACE
Lenten Series, 2003 – Grace Church, Haddonfield
John 20:19-23 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

This is the last of our series of meditations for Lent on “peace.” Why did we choose this theme? It is a gift of God and our call as Christians to be peacemakers. Do you know who picks the theme each year? I do! Why did I choose this subject this year? I have been troubled at the prospect of war from the beginning. What did the last century teach us? With each war, we saw destructive forces become more lethal. More and more innocent people died. We were promised that each war would be the last. That promise was never realized.

The power of war, and its violence, is a terrible thing. What we have seen on American television does not show the depth nor despair of human suffering. We receive “sanitized” news reports. We never see the Iraqi people who have been injured or died. We see little of the homes that were destroyed by our bombing. Arab newscasts have been more honest in showing the destruction war has brought.

What effect does war have on our soldiers? What effect does it have on the civilians where it is waged? It is the same with every war ... the innocent die. Not just soldiers, but the civilians. How many thousands have died or will die? We hear about the hundred or so American casualties... but what about the others? We have been removed from the horror of war. We tend to minimize the death of others. We call it “collateral damage.” What is worse, is that this becomes so acceptable in our society. The reality is that people die in war. And yet, we are so far removed from what is actually happening.

What do we as Christians believe about war and peace? What are the ethical and theological dilemmas that face us? Can we allow governments of the world to make war and just sit back?

I have talked with veterans of other wars over the years. My father, uncle and father-in-law were World War II veterans. My Dad was in the Philippines after the Americans retook the islands. My uncle flew b-24 Liberators over Italy and Germany. My father-in-law served with General Patton in the Third Army. The saw first hand the horror, the pain, and the suffering of war up close. A shadow hangs over them. The war left a deep mark on all of them. They looked into the face of death and dying. The inhumanity of war scarred them ... forever.

There were my friends and uncles who went off to Viet Nam. We learned that the government officials misled us. We came to distrust their motives. Lies were made to cover up mistakes. They became more pronounced as the war dragged on. Errors were covered up. I know first hand some of the ill that came after the war. One soldier discovered his comrades engaging in drug trafficking after the war. They figured they deserved some money for all that they went through. He turned them in ... and was forced into a witness protection program the rest of his life. His family didn't learn of his death until six months after he died. They are the Korean war, the Gulf War, and others. We ask so much of our young people and then forget about them.

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Now war has become a spectator's sport. We can watch CNN for 24 hours. It's like a sports game to us. We will accept nothing less than the defeat and humiliation of the opponent. It's victory ... at all costs. If you're not for the team, you become the object of hate and ridicule. We call others names, attack them if they disagree with us, and resort to fistfights. What's more, when we tire of the war, we simply turn off the television.

War confronts us with the problem of evil. I hate evil. I am told in my Holy Scriptures that hate and evil are defeated by God. What we so easily forget is that war unleashes evil in terrible ways. I recently met with a person who shared that her teen son can't wait till he can enlist ... so he can kill people. Another man told me that the Iraqis don't matter ... after all, they are just heathens. War releases some terrible things inside of us.

Christ calls me to be a man of peace. It is not a popular stance today. I have been accused of being "unpatriotic." It can result in our not being allowed to practice our faith or express our beliefs. I have met many others who feel this way. How sad. See how war has changed us?

How do we deal with this deep, disturbing feeling that war is still terribly wrong? How do we share the understanding that we are all God's children ... not just a few? We can support our soldiers ... and we do. But many of us are troubled by the underlying political and self-oriented themes that often motivate war. Many of us remember Vietnam. The news can be manipulated. We don't always get all the fact. The truth often is the first causality of war. What are we to do? We must fall back on our faith. We must pray ... especially for peace.

Our young people are going to come back changed. It will not be all for the better. I have had to deal with the people who have participated in the horror or war ... and been sadly changed. There is no peace for them. I read a story this past week of a young soldier. It was entitled, "I have done what God told me not to do." What are the implications of this?

Have we created a hunger and thirst for more war and violence? Are we ready to deal with those who have been emotionally damaged, spiritually broken and mentally scarred? What about the other people, the residents of the land we have invaded? We talk about liberating, but what harm are we afflicting?

Archbishop William Temple was confronted during World War II once. He was asked why not just pray for the soldiers? He said that we must pray for our enemies as well, some of whom were Christians. What we are called to do is to pray for all of God's children. Not just a few. We also need to constantly pray for peace too!

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What does my Lord Jesus tell me to do? Jesus says that we are to receive to gift of peace. We are told to share this gift with others. In the passage from John we hear, “Peace be with you.” This peace comes with the Holy Spirit. What keeps us from embracing this peace? It is the same thing now as it was then ... fear! Much of war is motivated by fear. Some of it justified. Much of it is not. We must understand that evil used fear against us. When we are afraid, we strike out. We have now come to the place in life where we strike first before we are struck. It is a troubling shift in our approach to the world.

What about Jesus’ admonition not to embrace wrath but to turn the other cheek? We seem more consumed with the notion of self-preservation rather than furthering the Kingdom of God. We are afraid of dying. We are afraid of losing. We are afraid ... hence, we have no peace.

There is an old saying ... **NO GOD ... NO PEACE, KNOW GOD ... KNOW PEACE.** Is this possible for us today? Where are we going to place our trust and hope? In Christ? In the hope and pursuit of God’s peace? Or elsewhere? What are we to make of “peace” as Christians. “Peace be with you” ... is this something only Christ can give? What is our task as Christians?

What does our Bible say about peace? In the Old Testament, the word for peace, “shalom”, appears 250 times! It means well being that comes from God. It is associated with the blessing and presence of God. Peace in the Bible is a gift of fulfillment and completion. In the New Testament, the word for peace, “eirena” appears 91 times, 24 times alone in the Gospels. It is Christ’s gift to disciples. Peace is the opposite of war. It has overtones of redemption. Here peace talks about wholeness and newness for human relationships. It is associated with a new power marked by joy and hope.

Look at the place of peace in the place of liturgy. It points us towards powerful understandings. We have prayers for peace ... a reminder to be people of prayer. We pass the peace before we participate in our Holy Eucharist ... a reminder of that peace is a prerequisite before Communion. Perhaps most telling, our dismissal says “go in peace to love and serve.” We are to take peace into the world. Our baptismal covenant says that we are to “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.” Peace is at the heart of our liturgy.

Now we are left with the nagging problem of peace. We will ever be able to embrace it? Is the gift ever to be attained? Will evil overcome us? Will we ignore God’s will? We are reminded also that Jesus is at the heart of our faith. At the heart of Jesus is peace. As Christians, we are called to live and share peace. It has been received as a gift, now we are called to share that peace.

My hope is that this Lent has caused us to pause and reflect on peace. Our prayers for peace must overcome the angst of war. There is an awesome task set before us. As Paul

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says, the peace of God passes all understanding. This is the peace that is ours. Jesus says, “Peace be with you.” Is it with us?

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you ... PEACE.