

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 27/Trinity XVIII Year A 2023

One of the reasons various Christian sects (mostly protestant, evangelical and low church types) dismiss more traditional forms of worship is that they claim traditional forms of worship are ‘unbiblical’. The argument that traditional worship is somehow unbiblical doesn’t really stand when considering how traditional forms – such as those expressed in this place - are saturated with scripture! Someone has done the sums and discovered that something like 85 % of the Book of Common Prayer is either a direct quote from Scripture or a reference scripture in some way. Indeed, it has been said that “BCP is the Bible arranged for worship.” And the more catholic expressions of traditional Anglican worship (such as found in the English Missal in use here) do not abandon this principle. Indeed, it extends it. Most weeks here, there are three significant readings, one each from the Old Testament, New Testament and Gospels. The chants at the start of mass, the alleluia before the gospel, the sentence before the offertory and after communion are all drawn from scripture, mostly the Psalms. And the key pillars of the mass are likewise based on scripture. The *Kyrie*, or *Lord have mercy*, perhaps the most basic and essential of all prayer, references the words of the blind beggar, *Lord Jesus Christ, son the living God, have mercy on me!* The *Gloria*, drawn from the angelic song to the shepherds. The *Holy, holy, holy* based on Isaiah’s heavenly vision. The *Agnus Dei*, or Lamb of God, the very words of John the Baptist proclaiming Christ on the banks of the Jordan. And even something more devotional, as we prepare to receive communion, *Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof...* are words spoken by the Centurion whose servant was healed in Matthew’s gospel.

And the blessing used in our rite - the very last words of the mass - *the peace of God which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*. Anglicans tend to be very attached to this formulary. It is beautiful and evocative. And it comes directly from our epistle reading today. Not only do we pray with the scriptures. The scriptures are our prayer.

This week, we take again take a sidestep from an exclusive focus on the gospels to turn to the offering from the Epistle to the Philippians. It is of course one of the limitations of our time together on Sundays that we cannot say everything there is to be said on all the readings the church carefully proposes each week. But it will be no

bad thing to linger a little over the richness of this little letter, written by Paul in prison. Paul knows the likely outcome of his imprisonment, that is, his death by execution. In the reading we heard two weeks ago (which coincidentally we also heard at Evensong last Sunday) Paul expressed his inner turmoil. He wanted it all to be over. Not because he despaired of his situation but simply because his desire to be completely united with Christ was so overwhelming. At the same time, he knew that there might still be work for him to do in encouraging the brethren. And so, he was resolved that whatever would further the gospel best, then he would resign to that.

It is perhaps remarkable that the apostle – in prison, awaiting death - in what we can only imagine was a grim and dire situation, might then speak of peace. Indeed, he speaks of joy and peace. In just the half-dozen verses of our epistle reading today, Paul twice exhorts the Philippian church to rejoice, and twice he prays for peace. The Greek word Paul uses here for ‘peace’ is *erēnē*. In Paul’s thought, peace comes from our reconciliation with God. The Latin equivalent was ‘pax’. In the 1st-century, the word *pax* was very loaded indeed. The evangelist Luke in particular picks up on this. It becomes a golden thread that runs through his gospel and comes to play especially in the infancy narrative. It is significant because *erēnē/pax* was one of the key political platforms the Roman emperors used to assert their power, the famous *pax romanum*, ‘peace of Rome’. A cult to Peace had been instituted by Augustus. In Rome he had built a magnificent temple to peace. ‘*Peace given to the world*’ was frequently inscribed on Roman medals. But even in the first century, this so-called peace was viewed with suspicion. The Roman historian Tacitus put into the mouth of the Scottish tribesman Calgacus, *They make a desert and call it peace*. The peace promised by Rome was recognised if not quite a phony peace at least a shaky peace.

But the desire for peace remains. It is perhaps, with love, the deepest longing of the human heart. We all desire an existence without conflict. A life of quiet contentment, of order and gentle ease. Paul recognizes that true peace certainly *does not* come from the state. What the emperor proposes as peace is but a faint imitation. Worse, in fact. It is a parody of peace. Paul instead boldly claims peace comes *from* God.

Paul’s words used at the end of mass are rightly shaped to become a prayer for peace, for a blessing of peace. It is a gift – a grace -we rightly ask for, because it is not something we can acquire or gain by our own merit. Paul, however, outlines several *conditions* by which we might be *receptive* to this gift.

Firstly, peace comes by trusting that *the Lord is near*. *Do not worry about anything*, he says. Easier said than done, perhaps. But it is a sure truth that worry and anxiety both prevent and undermine the gift of peace. And, of course, it echoes Our Lord's own words in Matthew's gospel about worry and anxiety. But trust in the nearness of the Lord is simply one of the implications of faith in the Incarnation: *God is with us*. God remains with us. And whatever hardship and difficulties life throws at us, remains with us still. Remember, this is written by a man in prison facing death by execution. And yet he still can say, *The Lord is near*.

Secondly, we can make ourselves receptive to the gift of peace by shifting our worry to prayer: *in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God*. It is the very direction of Christian prayer that makes us receptive to the gift of peace. Because we shift the focus from ourselves to God. If the focus remains on us, then there will be no shortage of things to be miserable or anxious about! But when the focus becomes God, then thanksgiving becomes the dominant note.

Finally, peace will come by thinking about *whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable*. This is surely one of the 'red letter' texts of Paul. It is a verse we would all do well to commit to heart. And it highlights why peace so often evades us. Because we spend so much of our time thinking about what *is not* true honorable, just, pure, and commendable! Instead, we allow ourselves to be consumed by disharmony, violence, impurity, falsehoods. It should not surprise us that peace evades us when we spend our energies on junk, on poisonous thoughts, on rubbish priorities!!

Classical Christian theology teaches us that the life of virtue and growth in grace comes when we *cooperate* with God's grace. The gifts God seeks to so freely give us do not work like magic. When the blessing is imparted at the end of mass it is not some magical incantation said by the priest over the congregants. Yes, it is a prayer. And yes, we believe God hears the petitions of his faithful. But if we want true, deep, lasting, and indeed *godly* peace to be ours, then we must cooperate with God. To receive the peace which surpasses all understanding, then the conditions need to be right to receive the gift. Trust the Lord is near. Apply yourself to prayer. And contemplate what is true, good and beautiful. Do this, and as Paul says, *The God of peace will be with you*. Amen.