

## 6 Easter (C)

Jn 14.23-29

You've all probably heard the phrase that some Christians are so "heavenly minded that they're of no earthly value." Is that familiar? Certainly the idea is not uncommon. One of the reasons many people struggle with the life of faith has to do with its perceived irrelevance. What do faith and heaven and all that stuff have to do with life in the real world? God and Jesus and the church, that's all well and good, but how much do they really matter when it comes to the day-to-day struggles of the human experience?

For example, what do God and Jesus and the church have to do with our job (or our lack of a job), or with our families, or with our personal struggles to live meaningful lives? What do God and Jesus and the church have to do with the problems of poverty, disease, and war? What do God and Jesus and the church have to offer to the questions of how we fix our national economy, or how we stop the threat of terrorism, or how we address climate change?

Faced with these kinds of very real and very serious challenges, a lot of people look at the life of faith and conclude that it has nothing to offer to today's world. God and Jesus and the church don't seem to be of much help when it comes to the day-to-day grind. Whether we're talking about our lives as individuals, our experience as a nation, or the struggles of people all over the world, lots of people have concluded that the gospel is irrelevant.

And you know what? They're absolutely right: relative to these kinds of problems, the Christian faith is utterly and completely irrelevant.

Now, why would I say that? Shouldn't I be saying that the gospel is the solution to all of these problems? Shouldn't I be saying that exercise of Christian faith is the most relevant or the most meaningful way of dealing with every one of the challenges I've mentioned?

Well, for one thing, it doesn't really matter what I say: it only matters what Jesus says, so let's start there. In today's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you, my own peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Clearly Jesus has it in mind here that we should understand the peace he gives as being different from the peace offered by the world. So if we're going to understand this difference, we have to have some sense of what each of these look like, both the peace Jesus gives and the peace the world gives.

So how does the world give peace? What exactly is peace? Well, let's see: *Webster's Dictionary* gives us the following clues: "absence of war or hostility; freedom from disagreement; harmonious relations; public security and order; inner contentment or serenity; sometimes used as a greeting."

Those all sound like good things, don't they? What could possibly be wrong with the absence of war or with inner contentment? And yet, Jesus says, "I do not give to you as the world gives."

Here's the thing: the peace of Christ is not a tool that we can use to advance the kingdoms of this

world. The kingdoms of this world are far too small, far too limited in scope to accommodate the peace of Christ. Because in the kingdoms of this world, peace is usually a zero-sum game: the more peace you have, the less peace I have, and there's only so much peace to go around.

When peace is defined as the "absence of war," it's usually the one with the biggest guns who gets to say what counts for peace. When peace is defined as "freedom from disagreement," it's usually the one with the most access to the political process who gets to say what counts for peace. When we think of peace in terms of "public security and order," it may not matter very much how that order is achieved, just so long as there is stability and order. And when we think of peace in terms of "inner contentment or serenity," then it doesn't matter whether or not what makes you content works for everyone else; what matters is that it's right for you.

Now, don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that the absence of war or public security or inner contentment are bad things. But what I am saying is that if we're to receive the peace that Jesus gives we can't define those things first and foremost in terms that the world gives to us and then try and somehow squeeze Jesus into the picture. That's not the peace of Christ: that's peace on the world's terms with a little bit of religious window-dressing. That's why I said earlier that Christianity has nothing to offer when it comes to the agendas of today's world. If we're to receive the peace that Jesus gives, we have to receive it on the terms that he himself sets. We can turn Jesus into a means of pursuing a goal that has been set for us by the world.

There's something interesting about what Jesus says to his disciples in today's gospel lesson: this is the first time in the entire gospel of John that the word "peace" is mentioned. We're three-quarters of the way through the gospel of John and there's been no mention whatsoever of peace, and now, when he's talking with his disciples about the fact that he's leaving them, Jesus says to them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." The disciples were probably thinking, "What's he talking about now? Where is *this* coming from?"

But here's something else interesting about the use of the word "peace" in John's gospel: it doesn't show up at all before this point, but it shows up several times *after* this point, and almost every time that it does it's associated in some way with the presence of the risen Christ. The day of his resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples and the first thing out of his mouth is, "Peace be with you." Just before he bestows on them the gift of the Holy Spirit, he says to them again, "Peace be with you." And a week later, when he appears to Thomas, he again greets his disciples by saying, "Peace be with you."

This is important, because it helps clarify the difference between the peace of Christ and the peace of the world. Remember? "Peace I leave with you, my own peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." The peace that Jesus gives signifies the gift of new life that God gives to the world in and through the presence of the risen Lord. We're way beyond the absence of conflict and public security and even inner contentment; now we're talking about the wisdom and the holiness and the glory and the power of the living God manifest in the middle of a world that longs for peace.

This is why the peace that Jesus gives is not like the peace that the world gives. The peace that the world gives is all about security; it's all about protection and safety. The peace that Jesus gives, however, is about surrender; it's all about obedience and sacrifice. This is why, from the perspective of the world, the peace of Christ has nothing to offer: if what we're trying to do is

play a zero-sum game in which peace is a commodity that we have to hoard for ourselves, then Jesus has nothing for us. He's not going to play that game.

But if we're willing to play *his* game, then we will find that we share in his peace. Then we will find, as Jesus said to his disciples, that his presence is a reality in our lives. "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." This is one of the consistent themes of this part of John's gospel: Jesus tells his disciples he's going away, but that it's in their best interest for him to go away. It is only by going away that he will be able to be present with them in a new way.

I think that one reason we sometimes find it so difficult to practice this kind of peace in our own lives is because we think of peace in worldly terms: we think of it in terms of the *absence* of something, rather than in terms of the *presence* of something. The *absence* of conflict, the *absence* of hostility, the *absence* of chaos and distraction: calm, quiet, blissed out, kind of like the monk sitting on top of the mountain, thinking deep, spiritual thoughts, alone with God. Very serene, very enlightened, very peaceful.

But I don't think the peace of Christ is really like that; it's not about absence, it's about *presence*, the presence of the risen Christ, the presence of the Word of God made manifest through the power of the Spirit. And the Word of God is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from the marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart, and before him no creature is hidden but all are laid bare" (Heb 4.12-13). That's from the letter to the Hebrews.

Or, as Jesus himself put it, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3.8).

The gift of peace that Jesus offers to us is not going to be of much use to us if what we try and do is use it as a tool in the development of an otherwise worldly life. In fact, the gift of peace that Jesus offers to us will put us on a collision course with the world: if we read just a little further in John's gospel, beyond today's gospel lesson, we find Jesus saying to his disciples, "I have said these things to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16.33)!

That's what the peace of Christ is; the power that overcomes the world. The peace of Christ is an invitation to experience the presence of the living God as a daily reality in our lives.

Let us not to seek to make of it something other than what it is. Let us instead with grateful and obedient hearts receive the gift of peace that he gives to us, and let us pray for the grace to share that peace with others, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

25 May 2019  
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral  
Columbia, SC