

Easter 2 – April 15, 2012

Peace * Shalom * Wholeness for All Creation

“Peace be with you.” It’s what the risen Christ says repeatedly to his friends when he appears to them. “Peace be with you.” Not, “Shame on you for running away and leaving me.” Not, “See what I had to go through because of you.” Not even, “Weren’t you paying attention when I was telling you about the way of the cross?” No – “Peace be with you.”

Liturgically we call this the peace of the Lord, when we exchange a handshake or hug with each other. St Paul calls it the peace of God which passes all understanding, and you’ll often hear those words in the blessing at the end of the service. The Hebrew word for it is Shalom, and it has many layers of meaning that I want to explore today.

The first dimension of this shalom is a very personal one – it means peace with God through Jesus Christ. It means that our broken relationship with God is healed. The disciples badly needed to hear that. They were mired after the crucifixion in shame, guilt, fear, grief, literally locking themselves up behind closed doors. So Jesus speaks to them this word of healing, forgiveness, restoration – “Peace. Shalom.”

It’s the word that is always being spoken to us: Christ is always holding out his hand to us with forgiveness, healing, acceptance. That’s one of the reasons that in our services the priest says to the congregation after the confession and absolution, “The peace of the Lord be always with you.” It’s an assurance that we are forgiven and brought back into relationship with God through Christ.

But shalom has another very important dimension, which is communal. It means peace with one another. The oneness with God that we experience (or glimpse) always leads, if it’s genuine, to a desire for peace and right relationships with one another. So after hearing the priest say, “The peace of the Lord be always with you,” there’s a verbal response (“And also with you”) and a symbolic action as we pass the peace to one another. It’s a deliberate disruption from our quiet time of prayer and confession with God, to reconnecting with the community of faith around us. It’s meant to get us on our feet and out of our places to physically reach out to one another. God’s gifts to us are never meant to be guarded as private and personal; they’re always to be shared.

So we reach out to each other at this moment in church, and after the service we hear the words of dismissal: “*Go in peace*, to love and serve the Lord.” We’re sent into the world to reach out to those beyond these walls, and especially to those people and places that are most in need of God’s shalom. Shalom means wellbeing in the fullest sense – not just peace as a nice spiritual feeling, but peace as justice, safety, the absence of violence or inequity. We also call it the kingdom of heaven – a way of being with one another where no one is downtrodden, no one goes hungry, all are provided with the necessities of life. The Old Testament prophets have a lot to say about God’s call for this way of life, where “none shall hurt or destroy” [Isaiah 11:9].

It’s that communal or societal dimension of the peace of Christ that makes our faith have political aspects. We *do* have to care and be active about how we treat each other, how the poor and vulnerable are treated, how nations treat one another. We *do* have something to say when profits are protected and people are not, or when the rich are allowed to accumulate wealth and the poor are left to fend for themselves, or when dictators deny their people freedom and security.

Our vision of shalom, of the way things should be, makes us get involved with changing the ways things are.

But there's yet another dimension of shalom that I want to talk about, especially as we look ahead to Earth Day next week, and that's the environmental dimension. Shalom means peace with all of creation – peace with the myriad species with whom we share this planet. Shalom means care for the earth and all its creatures. The peace of Christ calls us into relationships of inter-dependence, not of domination and control. And that means respecting and cherishing the many forms of life that sustain this complex earth. It's a perspective that hasn't been prevalent in our faith traditions, but is urgently needed now.

You won't find prayers for the environment in our prayer books. The BCP has prayers for good weather and harvests, and some prayers for agriculture and fisheries, but the focus is on the need for plentiful yields for human use. There was no awareness that the earth itself is sacred and in need of care, or that its creatures and produce were for anything other than our use. In the BAS, published in 1985, there are prayers that we may share the good things the earth provides, and prayers for good harvests, but still there was no awareness of how fragile the web of life on the earth is, or how significantly human behaviour is damaging it.

So we have to be creative. We need to write prayers and dig into the Scriptures so that this dimension of God's peace is brought into people's consciousness, and brought into church. We need to take action and understand that that is as much part of being faithful Christians as supporting missions or foodbanks is. We need to examine our conscience not just about things like whether we have been unloving, or dishonest, or selfish, but also about whether we have damaged the environment or hurt other creatures by the way we live and consume.

In the Lord's Prayer we pray every week that we may learn to live here on earth as in heaven. This living in God's shalom, in the peace of Christ, is meant to begin here, now, with us. St Paul writes that all creation is groaning and longing for redemption, and waiting for us to truly become the children of God. [See Romans 8.] That is our calling: to live in the peace of Christ in right relationships with God, with each other and with the earth and its creatures.

I will close with part of a prayer by Hagen Hasselbalch (about whom I know nothing) in a favourite book of mine – a collection called *Earth Prayers*.

Let there be peace in every part of the world.

Let friendship prevail for the good of all humanity.

Let the people inspire their leaders, helping them to seek peace and build a better world.

Let those who have power deal respectfully with the resources of the planet.

Let trees grow up by the billions around the world.

Let green life invade the deserts.

Let industry serve humanity and produce waste that serves nature.

Let ordinary people meet by the billions across the borders.

Let them create a universal network of love and friendship.

Let billions of human beings co-operate to create a good future for their children and grandchildren.

Let us survive in peace and harmony.

Amen.