

Peace Sunday 2005 - "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"

Introduction to the Readings and Homily Notes

First Reading: Isaiah 49:3.5-6

Isaiah spoke to a broken world, to a nation that had known military conquest, slavery and exile. Yet in the midst of their experience of defeat the People of God receive a message of hope to share with all nations, including their oppressors - the promise of God's salvation for the whole earth.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Today we begin our reading of St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. His greeting to the early Church expresses the calling of the whole Christian community - to receive, and therefore to share with our neighbours, the gift of God's peace.

Gospel: John 1:29-34

Today's Gospel reading, taken from the Gospel of John, presents the dramatic meeting of Jesus and John the Baptist. The Prophet finds his search for God's Kingdom answered in the person of Christ, who alone can pour out the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, on our broken world.

Homily Notes

First Reflection

The theme offered for this Peace Sunday is a quotation from St Paul (Ro 12.21): "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." And that seems to be the choice that we face today. Can we live in this world without resorting to evil? In practical terms that means questions such as these: Do we have to answer violence with violence? Is the proper response to terrorism a war on terrorism? When our freedoms are threatened is the right answer to curtail human rights?

And quite apart from complicated political choices, there is the question of our inner attitudes and outlook. Can we witness some of the events which we see on our TV screens day by day without having our hearts poisoned by the experience? If terrorists sow in our hearts hatred, a desire for revenge, contempt and prejudice towards them and the communities from which they come, have they not in some perverse sense already won? Then we have indeed been "overcome with evil", as Paul warns that we might be. Then evil has triumphed before ever we do anything.

But can we, as Paul dares to suggest, "overcome evil with good"? Is there another way? The cross at the front of your church proclaims that there is. God's answer to the evil in our world was not a display of overwhelming force or irresistible power. It was the poor man of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, who went (as John the Baptist prophesied) as a "Lamb" to his death, neither resisting nor cursing his captors; and that despite the fact he was innocent; despite their violence and cruelty. *This* is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit, says John the Baptist. *This* is the one who takes away the world's sin. It is *his* message which is the only real answer to violence and hatred and all the pain that these have caused over the centuries.

That's what we proclaim in our creed and that is what we are called to witness to in our lives - refusing to be overcome by evil, but overcoming evil with good. It is the only way that can bring hope to our world. It is the only way that can make us the "light to the nations" which Isaiah prophesied. It is the only way that offers any light at all.

Of course, Christian faith doesn't take away the need to make difficult choices in diplomacy, in politics and in law-making. It doesn't require that Christians necessarily be pacifist, for instance, or that they adopt any particular political position; neither does it imply that our response to terrorism must be "weak" in some sense. But it does require that we Christians all agree on this: we will not hate; we will not get even; we will not act violently against whole peoples because of the action of the few. More radically still, it leads us to pledge: we will love our enemies and do good to those who hate us; we will act to bring hope to the hopeless situations in our world; and most of all, we will hold the brokenness of the world here in our community prayer, Sunday by Sunday. We will refuse to be overcome by evil. We will overcome evil with good.

Homily Notes

Second Reflection

What is Paul's first wish for the Church he founded in Corinth? "Grace and peace." It is a universal human aspiration. The words aren't even specifically Christian terms. Grace means a sense of the gifted nature of reality, a glimpse of the God-given in all things. Peace means the conditions within which to enjoy that wonder of being, of life and love. All peoples in every age have wanted that for themselves and for their children. And yet it remains necessary to wish these blessings again and again for those we meet - and even for the Church itself. These simple realities that we long for, grace and peace, seem always to lie beyond our grasp.

Peace Sunday invites us to reflect once more on that mystery of the coexistence of good and evil in the world and on how we can build peace. Perhaps Paul's greeting to the first Christians of Corinth itself offers us some insight. He tells his hearers that they are "the holy people of Jesus Christ, who are called to take their place among all the saints everywhere who pray to Our Lord Jesus Christ." We are all called to be "saints" - a shocking demand! But it doesn't mean that we must pretend to be perfect, when we know (and our neighbours know even better!) that we are not.

The demand is a different one, that we be touched by Christ and by the Spirit he pours out on his Church. It requires, firstly, that we be people of prayer, people who look unflinchingly and honestly at the woundedness of the world and bring it to Christ. He bore those wounds in his crucified body and he is crucified again in every scene of human suffering. But more than that, he who died that most horrifying death on the cross, was raised from the dead, and he has opened the way to Resurrection for even the most wounded and tragic places on the planet.

That faith requires that we do a reality check on our attitudes. Are they the attitudes of the Gospel - love of our enemies, forgiveness for those who do us harm, care for the most marginalised and for all who suffer? Or are they simply the attitudes of our time and our society? Could our neighbours see the difference our faith makes to our outlook? Are we "a light to the nations", such as Isaiah prophesied? Do we really thirst for the day when God's salvation "may reach the ends of the earth"? Or are we content to meet hatred with hatred, violence with violence, one wrong with another? The future of our planet depends on our answer, our attitude.

Will we take risks to bring healing to our world and search for those elusive gifts of grace and peace, or will we prefer the certainties of conflict, building ever higher defences, living in fear and making others live in fear of us? It's up to us, as disciples of the crucified and risen Lord. Who else can bring the hope of peace to the world, if we do not?

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