

The collect today reads, "Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth; Mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." The petition here is that God would grant us His peace all the days of our life, and considering that we are in the season of Epiphany, we should ask the question, was is the connection between peace and the manifestation of God? Let's begin to answer this questions by discussing what we mean by "peace."

In the Anglican tradition, we pray for peace quite often. In the daily offices, the suffrages include the petition, "Give peace in our time O Lord; For it is thou, Lord, only, that makest us dwell in safety." This prayer has an external emphasis to it. In fact, the the response to our request for peace in the 1662 (generally considered to be more from the evangelical instead of catholic perspective) BCP is, "For there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God," which clearly implies defense from external enemies that attack the people of God. Peace in our time implies that there would be a peaceful situation in our society, in our country.

And we certainly have been blessed with much peace in America and in the Western church for most of the past few centuries, but this peace has also been interrupted significantly at times. Thus we surely should not take peace for granted. Many parts of the world are not peaceful, especially for Christians. During the recent Syrian war, our brothers and sisters in the faith we tortured, raped, and killed because they did not convert to Islam. In China, the church, after being allowed to operate relatively openly for a few decades (though never without government intervention) is being driven underground. In Africa, Muslim extremists systematically oppress the Christians in their countries. So peace is nothing to be taken for granted. In our country, which was founded upon religious liberty—and this the result of Christian liberality—I fear that Christians are slowly but systematically being made scapegoats for the problems of society. We must push back through legal means and resist these small encroachments upon our liberties, and this will cost us. And if we don't, it will cost us more in the days to come. We are not suffering physically, but the frog is in the pot of water and the heat is slowly rising. So this prayer for peace is not a quaint relic from ancient times. It is a needful and important prayer. Thou Lord only makest us dwell in safety.

But in today's collect when we pray for peace, it seems that there is a more internal focus. Grant us thy peace all the days of our life. Peace throughout our lives seems to speak to the internal peace that we have because of God. This is a peace because we are connected to God through the love of Christ and by the saving work of Christ. This peace becomes the foundation of a joyful and quieted inner life. This is the peace that allows us to awake in the morning and face the challenges and stresses of the upcoming day that are persistent, difficult, painful, and tiring.

The prototypical example of peace, in my mind, is the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which is the gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent, from St. Matthew 21. Jesus enters into the city meek and lowly, seated on a donkey, headed toward the death through which He

would bear the sins of the world for us. We read, "And we He was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved saying, 'Who is this?'" Some version say, "All the city was stirred," and paraphrases will use the word "unnerved," or the phrase "in an uproar." In other words there was noise and tumult all around, but Jesus, in the midst of the storm, was stilled, controlled, knowing exactly what He was to do, and what He was to endure. This is the peace that we want. We will not have the exact knowledge that Christ had, but we have the life of Christ. This is the life that shows through us, stilling our souls, calming our spirits, in the midst of the chaos, in the midst of the suffering.

The first questions therefore for us today are, "Do we have this peace in our lives?" and if not, then, "How do we have this peace?" Peace come first, from being secure in who we are. This means that we must know the truth, more specifically the Truth as revealed to us by Holy Scriptures; and then ground ourselves in that Truth. This is first a cognitive and rational understanding of the great doctrines of the Christian faith and then secondly a living out those doctrines in our lives, an incarnation of those doctrines by our actions, words, and attitudes. The development of peace in our hearts, our lives, starts with a decision of the will to incorporate various disciplines in our lives, which maintain our connection to Christ through His Body and through our individual devotions. Know the Truth revealed through the Word of God, and then live that Truth.

Importantly, this is not "a truth" - not one of many truths, which is no truth at all. We are talking about The Truth, the only Truth, because it is God who has created the world and us, and therefore He is the definition of what is True. Christianity is the exclusive Truth and the only genuine source of peace.

So how do we know Christ? We know Him because the Word became flesh. We know Him because God has manifested Himself to us in Christ. God has made Himself know to us in His Son. In today's gospel we see the commissioning of Christ in His baptism. This is the official beginning of His ministry. It is His anointing into His office as savior, priest, and king of the world. Here Christ leaves his childhood and early manhood behind and embraces His call as the head of the new redeemed manhood. This event occurred out of the city alongside the Jordan River; but many many of the people had been coming to John the Baptist, so this was no separated, private event. It was a public declaration: "Behold the lamb of God who Takest away the sins of the world." At His baptism, the heavens are opened, the barrier between God and man is torn apart, and Christ is confirmed into His office by the witness of God the Father saying, "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased," and by the witness of the Spirit of God descending upon Him as a dove. Christ is made known to the world and to us. And we have confidence in Christ as the declared Son of God, and He is the basis for our new identity in Him as the redeemed people of God, fellow brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus.

Christ, therefore, is the basis of our peace. In fact, the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2, that He is our peace (a different context, but I'd argue that the point still stands). This is a completed fact in the lives of believers which is objectively and graciously given to us in our

baptism and sealed to us in confirmation. We generally associate peace with an emotion, you know ... that "peaceful easy feelin' ". But in stressful times, we can still have the peace of Christ. When the exam is hanging over our heads, when disaster strikes, when long-term illness sets in, we have to constantly remind ourselves in prayer and in our inner thoughts that God is in control, that we are His, that He is using this situation to work in us an eternal weight of glory, and that He loves us and is growing His Kingdom in the world and in our lives through the trials. This is why we have peace, not because Christ makes life easy, but because He is God, and He is Good. And in this absolute fact, we can move forward through the difficulties. Let the nations rage about us. We can have quietness in our souls because we are in Christ.

There is a beautiful prayer on page 595 of the prayerbook that reflects this.

O GOD of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength; By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The peace of God, therefore is yours in Christ, but you must learn to live into the objective reality of Christ, finding there the peace that He brings. Christ therefore is not only the source of our peace, but His sustaining presence is required to continuing in His peace. And His presence is granted to us through His Body. Again we rely on the dual meaning of this term, both His Body given to us in the Holy Communion, but also His Body the Church, of which the Holy Communion is the sacrament of unity.

This morning's epistle lesson continues in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans chapter 12. Last week we were reminded of our essential unity. "We, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another." This week, St. Paul continues this theme with an emphasis on the various roles that individuals have within the Body. We are all uniquely gifted by the Spirit of God in us to serve the local Church and the universal Church. I don't think we should view this specific list of gifts as categories into which everyone should be shoehorned. We all display various strengths across all of these roles. And this list is not comprehensive, but given to us as an example of the people within the church. Of great significance, however, is what follows immediately after these roles.

Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. Bless them which persecute you; bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.

St. Paul is giving us here instructions on continuing in peace with the Body of Christ and with the world. We have to have our imaginations shaped by the love of God and then live into that love. We must have our hearts open to those around us, first our brothers and

sisters in the parish, but also to those outside the parish. Bless and curse not.

Count on it, we will be treated unfairly in this world, and we work for justice for the love of Christ; but we don't take offense at every slight to which we are subjected. Focus on the main things, do not focus on the things about which there can be genuine disagreement. Be at peace with each other, be at peace with the world, and be at peace with yourselves in Christ. And this not because you are detached and dispassionate, because you are afraid to embrace the world out of fear, but because you are connected to the mission of Christ to claim this world for Christ through the love of Christ.

And this brings us to our conclusion. Christ is the *source* of our peace, through His Body, Christ is the *sustenance* of our peace, and Christ is revealed to the world *in* our peace. If we are bickering among ourselves, if we are clamoring for attention, if we divide over stupid things, our testimony to the world is ruined. Last week I saw a church called the First Christian Reformed Church. Not joking, a half block away on the same street was the Second Christian Reformed Church. What a poor representation of Christ. Anyone can see that we have something wrong here, that we are missing the point, and it drives people away from Christ. We here know what it is like to undergo a fracture in the local parish, and yes, there is a point where we must part ways. But our desire is that this parish would be right in the center of orthodoxy and of the beautiful tradition we have received because it is destructive to bicker over non-essentials, and we tarnish the name of Christ when we are petty. There is a way to handle disagreements – being contentious and divisive is not that way. If you have concerns, about what you hear in this parish, I invite you to talk with me, and I promise to listen humbly and to consider your issue prayerfully and carefully. But I ask the same from each of you. Our professed love of God demands that we love one another, that we serve one another, that we work toward a clearer understanding of the Truth of Christ in community, and that we be quick to confess our sins and offer forgiveness to each other. Let us be at peace, let us rest in the Truth of the Gospel of Jesus, and in the peace of Christ, let us open our hearts to each other and to the world around us so that Christ would be Glorified.

Let us pray.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth; Mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.