

Homily for 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time 2021



We were on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and strolling through Nativity Square in

Bethlehem and we came across a large group of people who were holding a demonstration in a very pleasant and well-ordered way. It was Pax Christi (the UK Christian Peace Association) and Pat Gaffney, the last chair, was in the centre of the group. They were there praying for peace in the Holy Land. Of all the things you might associate Bethlehem with throughout its history, peace is really not one of them, except for the angels declaration at Jesus' birth. Every group has fought over it and to be honest though not as bad as the battles within the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the various Christian religious groups are not known for their peaceful living together.

But looking around Bethlehem that day, sitting outside the cafes, Muslim and Christian women and men, some of the women veiled some not, were sitting together enjoying a drink of some sort and more importantly a chat. So in Bethlehem you have a town, surrounded by walls to keep people in, erected by people who might hate you, walls that are born of violence, but within the town you find certain little oases of peace. People of different religious faiths living together. Not without problems, but able to talk.

We are all doubtful about peace. Our world seems to exhibit more violence than peace at times. Yet the world simply would not function without there being these islands of peace, sometimes so small, sometimes only a family or group of friends or of neighbours, and yet they survive, they hold us together even when violence seems to dominate everything.

And I think we have to begin our search for peace celebrating these places of peace, and if we take them for granted, then pausing to value them. Because it is in widening these that eventually we build peace.

The first and second reading tell us something about the search for peace, which, as the Christmas story tells us, is actually about unveiling the presence of God in our world. If we ever struggle to trust in peace, then prayer is the place to go.

Look at the first reading. It is a great story and I can remember a book of Bible stories as a child that had the little Samuel walking through the dark Temple with a candle looking lost. What Samuel needs is someone else to show him the way, to open his ears to the fact that it is God speaking to him, something he could never have thought possible. That is what our search for peace needs at times. Someone to, as we say, 'think outside the box,' at times and open our minds to possibilities we never thought likely, because it is in accepting the world 'as it is,' unchangeable, that will always fail us in our search for peace.

Then in the gospel, it is Jesus' invitation to 'Come and see.' Of course, this is actually an invitation to come and discover who he is and enter into the wonder of his story, the gospel, and the salvation that arrives through his death at the end. But in more general terms, an invitation can be an openness to step through barriers, to enter into territory that for all sorts of reasons we feared to go, or scorned to go, or felt it was beneath us, or we were too proud to go.

In the search for peace it might be us offering the invitation, it might be us accepting it, and it might be us asking whether an invitation made some time ago, perhaps a long time ago, is still open.

Northern Ireland, and the many ways in which people have reached out to each other across communities and walls (even those rather ironically called 'Peace Walls') is a good example of this, even though the violence often went on and in some ways still does today.

The paradox of the gospel, that St. Paul brings out in his writings, is that it is through his death, through his blood, that Jesus offers us peace.

But surely that is the point. When we can see it. That God has to pour out his blood to show us the futility of us pouring out ours and others. It is through his death, St. Paul tells us, that there is no more Jew or Gentile, slave or freeman or woman. His death, the horror of his death, is Jesus' invitation to look again at his death on the cross, and say that there can be no greater misreading of his message than to take up arms, to spill blood for him, because he poured out his just to stop us doing so.

Today is Peace Sunday. We begin with prayer, and then look at our lives and ask, where an invitation needs to be made, a barrier brought down, guidance to be given or accepted, an openness to a change of mind and heart lived, so that we can expand those islands of peace that sometimes we fail to see around us.