

Advent 2, Sunday, December 8th, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

Peace: From First Principles

Introduction

Waterloo I was defeated, you won the war
Waterloo promise to love you for ever more
Waterloo couldn't escape if I wanted to
Waterloo knowing my fate is to be with you
Waterloo finally facing my Waterloo

What on earth does the film Muriel's Wedding have to do with peace? What on earth does the ABBA song, "Waterloo" have to do with peace? I want to explore this morning, the meaning of the living out of peace, the significance of living peaceably. I want to do this, beginning with this story about Muriel, moving to theological thought and then tying up the loose ends.

Muriel's Wedding

The film Muriel's Wedding is like many Australian productions – tragi-comic. Muriel Heslop, the central character, yearns for nothing more than peace: peace in healthy relationships with her family and her contemporaries. The inter-personal, the relational in her life is burdened with awkwardness, and this difficulty can be traced to her own intra-personal, internal condition grounded in an absence of self-confidence, having been emotionally abused through her early childhood years. The family from which she comes, we observe, is one marked by Bill, a wounded and wounding bullying father, and Betty, a passive, fearful mother, herself abused by her husband. Muriel spends her days in her room, listening to ABBA music, while also being the butt, the object, of jokes from her 'catty' friends. The scene we have just watched, where, she is on holiday on tropical Hibiscus island - tagging along unwanted – with her former school associates, is the beginning of her coming to terms with herself. By chance, she meets a former school friend, Rhonda, who herself has been a victim, but who has overcome the damage, and identifies Muriel as a fellow-traveller. One night on holiday, Rhonda and Muriel act out in karaoke-form, ABBA's song, "Waterloo", and its relevance is pretty clear. Ostensibly about Napoleon's last stand, it is also about Napoleon's fate – trapped and imprisoned by the European allies who brought him down. And yet as we watch these two girls, sing their song about their shared history of entrapment and abuse, something happens. They both begin to emerge from their anxiety as real human souls. Singing-out their pain through the metaphor of Napoleon, gives them strength, resilience, power. We see the genesis of their restoration to an internal peace of the soul, and by extension, a new found capacity to build real fruitful relationships. They remain adolescently clunky, but they are on the way.

Thinking Theologically

What stands out in this story is the connection, the reciprocity between, internal, existential peace – what I call 'a sense of self' – and external, relational peace with others – what I call 'community'. Years of experience and observation suggest to me, what is really quite obvious, but seldom stated or explained: that without a healthy sense of self, it is almost impossible to generate meaningful relationships, community, the good of all; while without the mutuality of real positive community upholding us, the human person remains socially isolated, emotionally stunted, with no real integrated understanding of himself. In short, a sense of self, creates community, while community creates a sense of self. Peace, social and personal; peace, communal and existential, nourish each other.

Obvious? Well not always, and seldom if ever really explained through scripture. But there is a reason for that. For the Hebrews – and I refer to both the Hebrew Bible in particular – peace is above all about the external, about relationships, community. Let us recall that the Hebrews, the Jews, were above all a practical people, a people concerned with society, with the political: no surprise there, since their main preoccupation

was about how to survive as an Exodus people, former slaves and rejects, among surrounding empires characterised by autocracy and oppression: from worst to best: Assyria, Egypt, then the Medes or Persians. In fact, it is probably only in the parts of the Wisdom literature, such as the Proverbs, where attention is given in the Old Testament to the human person's internal, spiritual, attitudinal state. With that in mind, it is necessary to add, that it is not really until the New Testament, where peace is understood to include more clearly the personal, the contemplative, the sense of self. It is among the small emerging Christian communities, where people are encouraged to reflect critically upon themselves, as individuals taking responsibility for others. Another factor that invariably shaped this move to greater sense of awareness, was the influence of Greek culture within the Christian communities – the Gentiles – a culture which was given more to contemplation than the Hebrew. So, we see, especially in Paul's writings, today in Romans, "May our dependably steady and warmly personal God, develop *maturity in you* so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all". The idea of maturity (*to auto phronein en allelois – being of the same mind among yourselves*), is about the journey of growth, becoming clear about yourself and your thinking, even as you continue to re-think things, while at the same time, sharply and sensitively aware of the broader community and its thinking of which you are an active part. Checking each with the other. Being in conscience at peace with yourself, while also striving to be at peace together.

Loose Ends

So, what may we say about peace, about living peaceably? That peace is both an internal thing (it includes an inward journey), but also an external thing (it includes an outward journey). Peace has to do with a sense of self and a sense of community. Each needs the other. Each nourishes the other, even as they may rub-up against each other as well, developing into a wholeness or completeness, which is effect, is the basic meaning of the Hebrew word for peace - shalom

Yehudi Menuhin's words echo from this morning's from our liturgy: "*Peace may sound simple - one beautiful word - but it requires everything we have, every quality, every strength, every dream, every high ideal.*"