Sunday, May 26th, 2019, Sixth Sunday in Easter
Readings: Acts 16:9-15, Psalm 67, Revelation 21:10, 22:5, John 14:23-29

Peace without Victims

Introduction

The word "peace" is a difficult one, but it stands at the heart of our Gospel reading today: Jesus' words of farewell to his followers and his statement about the peace he will bring. So, what better way to begin our thinking this morning, than with a clip from the British tragi-comic series "Blackadder Goes Forth". Set in World War I, in Flanders, on the Western Front, the series concerns the relationships of a few British soldiers in the trenches, who try to maintain a sense of normality and civility, in a situation that is very much the opposite. In our clip, there are Captain Edward Blackadder (Rowan Atkinson), a perceptive albeit, fatalistic observer of human affairs; Lieutenant George (Hugh Laurie), a bumbling aristocrat; and Private Baldrick (Tony Robinson), a working-class Londoner. In their conversation, the question is how the war broke-out in the first place. Captain Blackadder with pencils up his nose – trying to be declared insane, so he can be sent home, and not have to face the trench warfare that will soon escalate. Lieutenant George, declares that the reason for the war was the evil Germans and their empire building; while Baldrick is convinced that it all began with an ostrich being shot by someone called "Archiduke". While they all differ in their analyses, something does bind them together: their presence in the trenches as they ***fight to the death for peace***. And it is there where I want to begin.

In many places where I have worked as a minister or missionary, I have observed the close relationship that exists between peace and violence. Contrary to what you might expect, the two are not opposites; in fact, they are very much connected. Let me explain! In my experience, people always claim, that they fight for peace, that their violence has a peaceful purpose. The several dictatorships under which I have lived and worked, always considered themselves vehicles of peace, nobly fighting for human betterment. The two civil wars that I have witnessed – El Salvador and South Sudan – were and are, apparently, ostensibly, for peaceful ends. Even in established democracies, one gains the sense if it were not for the strong institutional structures, people would be at each other's throats as political and group passions explode. So, peace is always, blurry, messy, compromised – even from the start. In the struggle for peace, better said, a particular group construction of peace, peace has its victims. Is it any wonder that when people begin to talk of peace, *their* 'peace', I worry?

Human Beings, Culture and History

So how does this work? How is it that peace and violence are so connected? How is it that peace has victims? How is it that our constructions of peace, are so often bloody? And, the most important point: what insights does Scripture have to offer us, what does Scripture say that is different?

May I make some points!

First regarding the connection between peace and violence, peace and victims. When you dig deep into the mists of time, anthropologists tell us that almost universally, human beings have built practices, where there has been the sacrifice and persecution of people - individuals or groups – as a means, *the* means for ensuring security, stability, peace. In broad terms these practices were based on political stories, mythologies, which had as their purpose, the maintenance and protection of empires. A cursory awareness would tell you that this was the way with empires of the ancient near east, with empires of the west, including Rome; with empires of the Americas, including the Aztec and Inca worlds. Ancient mythology stated that the security and peace of the state could only be preserved through sacrifice of victims. These victims,

sacrificed at the altar of the state, became, martyrs, heroes. As one of the great Aztec scholars said: "there is a price to peace".

Today, some things have changed but some things most definitely have not. We are moderns, yes, but the way in which our thinking about peace remains tied up with violence, as that of our ancestors, is clear. No, we do not overtly sacrifice victims in public ceremonies to sustain the state, as did the ancients, but we do have our own liturgical celebrations – Remembrance Day, Anzac Day – and I am not having a shot at either; this is simply an observation – through which we raise *our* victims, *our* martyrs and heroes in *our violence for peace,*

So, in short, we have not escaped our ancestral mythologies. Peace in our heads is still entangled with violence. Peace in our actions is still entangled with victims, martyrs and heroes.

The Gospel

If I am correct about this human, social and historical problem, about the way in which our understanding and construction of peace is compromised by violence from the very beginning, what does the Scriptural tradition say to us in general and the passage before us, in particular, about peace. What sort of correction does the Bible offer? I make two observations:

First – this is only a recent thought in the light of our readings during Easter – do you recall early on in the Easter season, to be precise, the 3rd Sunday of Easter (Jubilate Sunday), we referred in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles to Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus. This has become a much-loved passage, with even agnostics and atheists able to identify it. What is especially interesting in it however, is something that is often missed; the words that Paul hears from Jesus: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me"? Paul's Christian conversion is one that involves his deconstruction from a man of religious violence with its victims, to one of peaceable-ness without victims. Paul must renounce his life of victimization if he is to follow Jesus. Peace and violence in the Christian lexicon, are opposites; there is no place for blurriness, messiness or compromise. The Christian life cannot proclaim *any* sort of peace, only a particular peace, with no rationalizations.

Second – our Gospel reading in particular – as Jesus farewells his followers – we hear that he promises the presence of the paraclete. We often interpret this as the Spirit, as Jesus' Spirit, consistent with the other gospels. John's Gospel is unique in naming the Spirit in this way. So, what is the point behind this name, paraclete? The point is this, that the term has a particular meaning: it refers to one who advocates, who defends – like a lawyer who is 'worth his salt'. The paraclete is God's defender of victims. And this is not just about, the defence of the disciples as they anticipate trouble with Rome and other empires, after Jesus has left them. The paraclete is the Third Person of the Trinity who promotes peace: uncompromised, uncorroded by violence and victims. The paraclete, calls Christians, and all people of good will, to a peace and peaceable ness where ***all people can develop and grow. Peace without victims, peace as development.***