

Christ's peace

Yesterday, I hosted a regional gathering of the Iona Community here at the Cathedral. They'd asked me to help them explore the question, 'How do we talk about peace at a time of war?' In preparing for the day, I realised that we needed to ask a *prior* question, a Pilate-esque question, if I can put it like that: not 'What is truth?' but 'What is peace?'

'What *is* peace?' It's a genuine question that I'd like you to consider for a moment or two. How would you define peace? What might it look like? What are its qualities? How might you experience it? As a Cathedral known the world over for its ministry of reconciliation, in a city that brands itself 'the city of peace and reconciliation', it's quite important that we have an answer. *Pause.* — 'What *is* peace?' - do share your definitions with me over coffee; I'd love to hear them!

In popular usage, 'peace' is often used to describe the settlement brokered at the end of conflict; at the *apparent* end of conflict - for who can say with any accuracy when a story begins, or ends. — In this version of 'peace', warring parties sign a treaty and with those signatures signal the establishment - or the resumption—of peace.

In reality, signing a treaty and inaugurating peace are hardly ever concurrent, are rarely even closely consecutive. True peace is not announced or negotiated. True peace is a slow-growing plant, that takes root, not through the pens of the powerful, but in the bodies of the poor, only realised in their flourishing.

Years of Fire and Ash is a collection of poetry by black South African writers. One of them, Mjele Msimang, was born on the day Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa. She writes:

i may have been born on 27 April 1994—
but i was never born free....

as long as this country exists
(as long as you do not understand)
as long as this country exists
(as long as we are ash)
as long as this country exists
(as long as we are disremembered)
as long as this country exists

then my children and your children
will never be born free
will be born(e) to the grave.¹

If peace, then, isn't the signing of a treaty, or the end of apartheid - for example - what, then, *is* it? The 16th century philosopher, Spinoza, argued that peace should be relocated from the space demarcated by former enemies to the life of the interior. 'Peace is not an absence of war', he wrote, 'it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice.'

Etty Hillesum, a remarkable young Jewish woman, wrote something similar—although she made a link back from the life of the interior to all that lies beyond us, from reconciliation to the self to global peace. A student in Amsterdam when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands, Etty began writing diaries to chart the restrictions imposed on her community, and her reflections on them. ‘Ultimately we have just one moral duty’, she wrote; ‘to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it to others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.’

Etty Hillesum was taken first to Westerbork Transit Camp and then on to Auschwitz, where she died aged just twenty-nine. Boarded onto the train that would take her to her death, Etty managed to write on a postcard, which she passed through the boards of the cattle truck to be sent on to one of her friends. This is what she wrote: ‘Opening the Bible at random, I find this *the Lord is my high tower*. I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, mother and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. We left the camp singing. Thank you for all your kindness and care.’

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Knowing that they were going to their deaths, still, Etty’s circle ‘left the camp’, left Westerbork, ‘singing’. How is that for a definition, a realisation, of peace?

Whether or not it comes close to the one you thought of a few moments ago, it does seem to relate closely to Jesus’ use of ‘peace’ both in today’s reading from John’s Gospel and from the three other times Jesus names ‘peace’ in John. Each time he speaks peace it is to those who are anything *but* peaceful; to the traumatised, the anxious, the doubting, the vulnerable, the fearful, the conflicted.

The *first* time Jesus speaks peace to his disciples is immediately after he has told them that he is to die. Overwhelmed by anticipatory grief, they are storm-tossed, struggling for breath. To them, Jesus says, ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid’ (14.27). ‘My peace’, Jesus says, ‘I leave’, ‘I give.’ ‘My’, ‘leave’, ‘give’: remember those three little words. We’ll come back to them.

The *second* time Jesus speaks peace to his disciples, he’s been describing how they will be persecuted after he dies, thrown out of the synagogues, hated because of him. They are, I imagine, aghast, shaking, bewildered, some ready to put up a fight, others looking for a way to take flight. Even so, at that moment, Jesus bids them ‘have peace.’ ‘Take courage’, he says, ‘I have conquered the world’ (16.33).

Jesus’ final three uses of peace come in today’s Gospel reading when he appears to the terrified disciples, who’ve gone into hiding, barricaded themselves in a house, convinced that Jesus’ killers will come for them next. ‘Peace be with you’, he says, ‘Peace be with you’. ‘Peace be with you’, he says a third time, to Thomas, who has not been able to believe that Jesus is resurrected (21.19, 21, 26).

The peace which Jesus speaks, which he prays, which he bestows on his disciples has nothing to do with external conditions, everything to do with presence, and with relationship. It is the peace of Psalm 46, felt though the earth changes, the mountains shake and the sea rages.

Even then, God says, God's people can be still, because they know who God is, and that God is with them (Psalm 46.10-11). The peace of which Jesus speaks, which he prays, which he offers, is about presence and relationship; peace regardless of external circumstance; peace, as Paul has it, that is beyond logic, irrational, 'passes understanding' (Philippians 4.7).

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Ironically, the pursuit of peace can put us under a lot of pressure, I think. Here at Coventry Cathedral, within the Community of the Cross of Nails, we task ourselves with 'building a culture of justice and peace', something so vital, something so essential which, for all that, just now feels completely overwhelming. And then, more personally, because we are people of faith, anxiety and fear can feel like failure, and so we redouble our efforts to trust more, to worry less—until that very effort overwhelms us, sends us spiralling deeper into existential angst.

As corrective to this 'could do better' approach to peace, comes *Jesus'* peace which is gift and legacy—bestowed upon us, not as an award for an exam we have studied hard for and passed, but through grace. This is peace which is *given*; peace received whilst the storm rages and all our plans are in freefall. If you are feeling anxious or vulnerable or doubting this morning, this peace is for you, especially.

And Jesus' peace is personal; '*my peace*', he says. *Jesus'* peace—even as he walks to his death—is rooted in knowing that he is not alone for his Father is with him (John 16.32). *Our* peace is to be founded in knowing that we are inseparable from Jesus so that even locked in the rooms of our fear, even should we face hardship or distress or persecution, or famine or nakedness, or peril or sword (Romans 8.35), even then we can know Jesus' presence and feel his peace.

Peace is personal—is in the person and the presence of Jesus Christ—and peace is gift, given even, perhaps *especially, in extremis*. Don't be anxious that you are anxious; don't berate yourself for your doubt and fear: finding peace is not a test. Listen—Jesus is holding peace out to you even as the earth melts around you, even as your best efforts at brokering peace in your relationships, in the world around you, seem as nothing. Let Peace embrace you. Live in that Peace even if you can't explain it; even if makes no sense. Peace is not a formula or a negotiation. Peace is a person, and relationship with that person. Peace is being held when all is lost. Amen.

1. 'Born(e) to the grave'