

May 9, 2010

Easter 6

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First Reading: Acts 16:9-15

Second Reading: Rev. 21:10, 22-22:5

Gospel: John 14:23-29

As a way of summarizing what they learned over the past year, I asked our confirmation students to reflect on a series of questions. One of the questions was:

“What difference does it make in your life to be a Christian?”

There were a number of interesting responses, including these three:

- * “I’m never alone – I always have God to back me up.”
- * “It makes me always feel comfortable in any situation.”
- * “The difference is Christianity gives me peace – peace of mind.”

None of these is earth shaking news – yet they all point to a significant blessing. They all describe a peace that this world cannot give.

Today’s gospel reading comes from that long section in John’s gospel called the farewell discourses. The scene is the last supper Jesus shares with his disciples – where he tells them he is going away and tries to prepare them for the days to come. Needless to say, the disciples are very distressed at the thought of being on their own, without Jesus. They had been together almost constantly for three years, and now they feel they are about to be abandoned. Who will look after them? Who will be their strength, their leader, their teacher, their guide?

Jesus senses their growing sense of panic, so he goes to great lengths to reassure them. Several times he says to his friends: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." "Do not let them be afraid." He promises the blessing peace. Even as he is leaving, Jesus tells of the Holy Spirit's coming – the Spirit which gives the peace the world cannot give.

As Jesus demonstrated in his own life, God doesn't remove all the troubles of the world – God doesn't provide an escape from stress and turmoil. Instead, God provides peace in the presence of troubles. God's grace enables us to keep our balance in this topsy – turvy world. God strengthens us to stand when things are falling down and falling apart around us. God gives a peace that is beyond human understanding.

German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, experienced the peace of God – even as he suffered in a Nazi prison during World War II. Bonhoeffer was one of a group of German conspirators who attempted to assassinate Adolf Hitler – in hope of ending the horrors brought about by his regime. When the plot failed, Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned. During his time in prison, Bonhoeffer continued to write, and functioned as a kind of unofficial chaplain to his fellow inmates. Toward the end of 1943, he wrote a prayer/poem that has the quality of a psalm. He prays on his own behalf, and for fellow prisoners. He thanks God for the gift of peace, and asks God to keep giving this gift to sustain them all.

"O God, early in the morning I cry to you.

Help me to pray

And to concentrate my thoughts on you;

I cannot do this alone.

In me there is darkness,

But with you there is light;

I am lonely, but you do not leave me;

I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace;
In me there is bitterness, but with your there is patience;
I do not understand your ways,
But you know the way for me.

O heavenly Father,
I praise and thank you
For the peace of the night;
I praise and thank you for this new day;
I praise and thank you for all your goodness
and faithfulness throughout my life.

You have granted me many blessings;
Now let me also accept what is hard
from your hand.
You will lay on me no more
than I can bear.
You make all things work together for good
for your children.

Lord Jesus Christ,
You were poor
and in distress, a captive and forsaken as I am.
You know all man's troubles;
You abide with me
when all men fail me;
You remember and seek me;
It is your will that I should know you

and turn to you.
Lord, I hear you call and follow;
Help me.

O Holy Spirit,
Give me faith that will protect me
from despair, from passions, and from vice;
Give me such love for God and men
as will blot out all hatred and bitterness;
Give me the hope that will deliver me
from fear and faint-heartedness.

O holy and merciful God,
my Creator and Redeemer,
my Judge and Saviour,
You know me and all that I do.
You hate and punish evil without respect of persons
in this world and the next;
You forgive the sins of those
who sincerely pray for forgiveness;
You love goodness, and reward it on this earth
with a clear conscience,
and, in the world to come,
with a crown of righteousness.

I remember in your presence all my loved ones,
my fellow-prisoners, and all who in this house
perform their hard service;
Lord, have mercy.

Restore me to liberty,
and enable me so to live now
that I may answer before you and before men.
Lord, whatever this day may bring,
Your name be praised.
Amen.

Surely, if a person can experience peace even as a captive of the cruel and inhuman Nazis, you and I can know peace in whatever challenging circumstances we may face. Peace is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, along with love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. God sent the Holy Spirit to comfort the disciples in the absence of Jesus. God sent his Spirit to sustain Bonhoeffer in that Nazi prison. God sends the same Spirit to be our strength and our peace.

Here is something intriguing to ponder: The Spirit that brings peace and blessed assurance is also the Spirit that disturbs us and stirs us from apathy – the Spirit that makes us hungry for justice and empowers us to act on behalf of those in need.

You could fairly say that it was the Holy Spirit that landed Bonhoeffer in jail in the first place. When the Second World War was looming on the horizon, Bonhoeffer was safe and out of harm's way – teaching at Union Seminary in New York City. He could have safely stayed there until the war was over – as several friends encouraged him to do. Instead, he felt the Spirit calling him to return to his homeland in its dark hour – and to try to be a light in the darkness. When so many were intimidated into going along with Hitler and his evil schemes, Bonhoeffer was led by the Holy Spirit to resist. His resistance finally cost him his life.

To be a Christian, to have the Holy Spirit, is to know a kind of peace and serenity that this world cannot give.

It is also to have a passion for justice and goodness that will not allow you to sit idly by while others are abused, oppressed, neglected.

The Spirit that gives peace to our souls is the same Spirit that speaks in our conscience and causes us to move beyond our comfort zone to do works of justice and mercy.

It is the very Spirit that we have come to know and love in Jesus. Jesus was always very grounded, confident, unintimidated and at peace –and at the same time passionately involved in defying evil and showing mercy to those who were oppressed. He was at once calm and passionate- serene and zealous.

By giving us the Holy Spirit, God provides what you and I need to live as disciples. Through his spirit, Jesus gives us a peace like his own – peace to enter into the troubles and difficulties of the world, and yet remain balanced, calm, and focused. Jesus once told his friends not to worry about what to say when they faced times of trial, when they were put to the test. He assured them that when the time came, the Spirit would provide the words they needed.

You and I need to learn what those first disciples finally came to understand: That following Christ is not so much a matter of will power as it is TRUST: Trusting the Holy Spirit to provide what is needed to do what we are called to do. In other words, the strength for the journey isn't given before taking the first step, but as we actually start taking those steps.

St. Paul calls it walking by faith, not by sight.

You will recall, the Hebrews had no idea how they were going to cross the Red Sea when they were fleeing from Pharaoh's army. There was no bridge. They had no boats. God provided a way. Likewise, they didn't have nearly enough provisions to make it through the wilderness all the way to the Promised Land. They had to learn to trust God to provide.

Fred Craddock observes: "The Holy Spirit does for us what Jesus did for the disciples."

The Spirit gives us peace to endure in a troubled and unpredictable world. And the Spirit gives us faith and courage to work for peace and justice for all God's people in this world.

Amen