

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14: 27)

It is important to remember the setting in which these words are uttered. John has made them part of Jesus' last conversation with his friends before his betrayal and death. They have eaten their last meal together, Jesus has washed his disciples' feet, and Judas Iscariot has slipped away into the night.

This is a somber, melancholy scene. There is a sense of lastness, of leave-taking. This is the last supper, the last time of comfortable familiarity. This is a threshold time and a frightening time. We've all been present at meals like this--when we know that everything is changing, that our lives will never be the same again, when we face tremendous loss and pain. The last meal taken together before departure from a much loved home, the last meal when our nearly grown-up child leaves home it's a bittersweet joyous time--, the last meal recognized only in retrospect--before the death of a loved one, the last meal before the circle is irrevocably broken.

So we can imagine what the disciples must be feeling-- they must be experiencing what the experts now call anticipatory grief, overwhelming grief, and paralyzing fear-

- fear of the suffering their teacher faces--what will happen to him?
- fear for themselves, their own personal, physical safety (even the strongest of us share Peter's cowardice as he huddles in the courtyard)
- fear of abandonment, of that ultimate loss when there is no meaning, when there is nothing

Among his words of comfort to his friends, Jesus offers two gifts: the promise of the Holy Spirit, sent in his name, and he gives them his peace.

His words at this last meal, before betrayal and suffering and death, anticipate the words of the risen Christ when he suddenly appears in the midst of his frightened disciples, who are hiding in a closed room. Then, John tells us, Jesus says: Peace be with you...and he breathes on disciples and says "receive the Holy Spirit--and then again he says: peace be with you.

What is peace? What does it mean to receive the peace of Christ--the peace of the crucified Jesus and the peace of the risen Lord? What indeed are we doing, what are we reenacting when-- as we will do shortly--we embrace one another and exchange his peace?

I remember the tension generated in this very parish when this ancient bit of liturgy was reintroduced in the early 70's. I think to a great extent we were anxious because we had to stand close to one another, see one another, touch one another, acknowledge our unbreakable kinship.

I think too we were/maybe are still sometimes a bit anxious because we're still not sure what Christ has to do with it, what peace is, what his peace is.

What is it? What did he, does he give to his friends who want him with them, who those friends who fear abandonment?

It's always easiest to begin with the negative even though in the one education course I ever took, I was warned never to begin with a negative example. But I can't resist pointing out what peace is not. Certainly, Christ's peace is not the absence of conflict. He never promises us a rose garden, but rather the garden of Gethsemane--the garden of darkness, struggle, and betrayal.

Certainly, Christ's peace is not torpor, stagnation, pleasant idleness. There is no room in his circle, his family, his kingdom for spiritual couch potatoes.

Certainly, the peace of Christ is not something sweet or sentimental. And it is certainly not easy.

As an observant Jew, Jesus knew about Shalom, that peace of God which is wholeness, harmony, security, sufficiency. He knew about the toughness, the realness of God's peace, its inextricable linking with justice, mercy and truth because he must have known the 85th Psalm: Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Yes, Jesus knew about Shalom. When he speaks to his friends at this last meal, when he tells them "Goodbye" in earthly terms, I think he is deepening, enriching, making something new out of that familiar concept of God's peace. The peace of Christ overcomes fear. The peace of Christ is neither an anesthetic nor an escape. It does not deny reality or difficulty or pain.

Rather, it is stronger than fear or despair. It can overcome fear and despair. The peace of Christ reminds us, assures us of the ultimate allrightness of human life in God's creation.

The disciples are indeed experiencing the end of something; they are aware that this is the last supper, the last time of comfortable familiarity. Yet Jesus is promising that this is not the end. That they will not be abandoned. That it will be all right.

I think that Julian of Norwich was writing about the Peace of Christ in the fourteenth century when she recorded her visions. She would be at home with us today because she too lived in a time of plague, violence, social and political instability. She herself had known great suffering and the terror of evil. And she writes of her vision: On one occasion the good Lord--who for Julian was mother as well as Lord--said, "Everything is going to be all right." On another, "You will see for yourself that every sort of thing will be all right."

He did not say, "You will not be troubled, you will not be belabored, you will not be disquieted; but he said: You will not be overcome." God wants us to pay attention to these words and always to be strong in faithful trust, in well-being and in woe, for he loves us and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him, and all will be well.

All will be well. It will be all right. It is all right.

The British Roman Catholic theologian Margaret Hebblethwaite wrote some years ago that she instinctively greeted her first born, minutes, maybe seconds after his birth, with the words,

“Dominic Paul, it’s all right, it’s all right.” Upon reflection, she observed that this "common message of comfort from a mother to a child" is a profound theological statement.

In these instinctively murmured words of comfort, mothers do not deny the pain, uncertainty, even the terror of life. They simply remind the child--and themselves--that at the deepest level, it truly is all right.

It’s all right--words spoken by mothers at all times and all places kissing hurts to make them well. Words spoken by mothers as Herod’s soldiers searched the houses of Bethlehem for baby boys. Words spoken in German, French, Dutch, Polish, Yiddish, Rumanian by mothers in box cars en route to death camps, Words probably spoken by Mary to her child--maybe as they fled to Egypt and maybe when he first tried to walk and fell down. And maybe he remembered them that last night and in the hours that followed. Maybe he recalled them on the cross.

Jesus says: I give you my peace. I leave it with you. You don’t need to be afraid. It’s all right.