

Sermon on Sunday 22 May 2022

by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Peace at home



What is peace? Is it just a meaningless abstract term that is impossible to pin down? Or is it one of those questions that can only be answered by what it means to each one of us?

When we talk about peace, it is nearly always as a contrast to conflict, stress or pain. We hope that conflict will be replaced by cooperation, respect and unity. We hope that stress will be replaced by calm. We hope that pain will subside or even disappear.

However, the peace the world can give often demands a high price. When countries are in conflict, whether it be diplomatic or outright war, any peace that is agreed upon is shaped largely by the side with more fire power or

economic leverage. In relationships that are unequal, there may be costs to one party more than the other. At an individual level, if we want peace from the demands of a job by going on holiday or taking a few days off, there may be a financial cost or a 'to do' list waiting on our return. And if we are ill, treatment and pain relief may have unwanted side effects. The more we think about peace, the more we find that there always a price to pay. And that price can undermine the peace itself that then becomes conditional, unreliable and transitory.

The reading from John today is Jesus talking to his disciples having washed their feet after the Passover meal. He has spoken of his death and predicted both his betrayal and Peter's denial. Understandably, the disciples are swimming in confusion, anxiety, disbelief and fear for Jesus, themselves and the future. And Jesus's response is... 'Peace'.

'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.'

Despite everything they are going to experience before and after the crucifixion, the disciples will have peace! Jesus is going to leave them; he will die on the cross, appear to them and then there will be a time when he leaves and they will see him no more in a form they visually recognise - but he **will** give them his peace.

The writer of John's Gospel bears witness that we too can have this peace. This peace is not something that we can buy, deserve through merit, gain - through our parents or by satisfying a list of conditions. No qualifications are needed. No grudges will be held, there will be no continual bringing up of the past and no exacting of penalties for what has gone on before and no exemptions will be carried over into the future.

This peace that is to be experienced is beyond all human understanding, and somehow God (who can do all things) has ensured that the price has already been paid by his Son, Jesus, dying on the cross. Our part is to turn from whatever is keeping us from God and, as individuals, invite Jesus into our hearts and continue our journey with him as our guide.

This divine peace is like no other, but it won't wipe out physical pain or even guarantee that life will be easy. Our lives will still see hardships and suffering but it will in the context of being held by the divine, wrapped in the fellowship of others and in the knowledge that even death cannot separate us from God. Jesus says, 'I will go to prepare a place.... I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.'

How can we describe this peace if it is beyond human understanding? Well one way is offered by the image of Lydia in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. What happens is all triggered by divine activity. God tells Paul to travel to a place. Lydia as a person seeking God is by the

river where other women pray and meet. She listens, God opens her heart, and her response is to invite Paul and his company to stay with her household. God's divine activity is linked to the openness of her heart that leads to both the sharing of hospitality and the building of community.

Lydia's peace is not bound up with her material possessions (even if she is a dealer of luxurious purple cloth) rather it is bound up with her encounter with Jesus, God's son, and this includes her response to him. Lydia invites Paul and fellow travellers into her **home**. People often express their discovery of the love of God, or their rediscovery of Church, as returning to or finding their home (where they can truly be themselves). Jesus explains, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make **our home** with them.'