

Peace and the Way of Jesus

John 14.8-17, 25-27

Simon Moyle

‘True peace,’ said Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr, ‘is not merely the absence of tension, but the presence of justice.’

The reason Simon has asked me to speak this morning on this topic of peace is because I’ve been on a bit of a journey these past seven or eight years in exploring something of the way being a disciple of Jesus leads you to do work for peace. What I’d like to do this morning is tell a bit of my story and intertwine it with the passage.

As the great Jesuit priest and peacemaker Daniel Berrigan has said, discipleship, the following of Jesus Christ, means ‘fitting your life into Jesus life.’ Being a disciple or follower of Jesus does not mean merely admiring Jesus or his teachings; nor does it mean merely being forgiven by him; nor is it a matter of picking some principles from the life of Jesus and transferring them across time to our day and attempting to plonk them down. Rather, it is the task of fitting our life stories into his life story, doing the kinds of things Jesus did and accepting the same kinds of reactions. They are not meant to be merely stories of people who lived 2000 years ago; they are not just informative stories about what happened to the saints or the apostles; we are meant to live them ourselves. That is discipleship, the living out of the Jesus story.

The problem for us, of course, is that the story that we’ve chosen, or perhaps more accurately the story that has chosen us, is one which is foolishness and weakness to the world. It’s the story of a man who is born in obscurity, who chooses simplicity, who does his work at the margins with those considered the least by our society, who repeatedly confronts unjust systems and who ends up being killed by the powers of his day for his provocative nonviolent action. Of all the stories we could choose to

follow, this one isn’t perhaps the most attractive proposition, particularly when there are so many more successful stories out there, stories where we can be rich, or we can be famous, or we can be powerful, or we can be winners. But if we follow Jesus, this is the story we’re invited into.

It’s a story of an actively nonviolent life. Even Gandhi described Jesus as the best exemplar of nonviolence in history. His is a life that refuses the paths of both fight and flight for a more creative third way. It’s a way that actively confronts and transforms injustice and violence but never perpetuates it, a way that is prepared to accept suffering but never to cause others to

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(Martin Luther King Jr)

suffer. Jesus’ teachings also bear this out: love your enemies, overcome evil with good, be blessed peacemakers, put down your sword. As Jesus says in today’s passage, those who love him obey his commandments. We

cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus, yet ignore what he asks of us.

Jesus also says in today’s reading that anyone who has seen him has seen the Father. That is, we know what the Father is like from seeing Jesus and the kinds of things Jesus does. So if Jesus is the best practitioner of nonviolence in history, then we have a clear vision of what God is like.

And of course it is this nonviolent way of God revealed in Jesus that is vindicated in the resurrection. And now we as his disciples live in the light of that resurrection, the triumph over sin and brokenness and death of all kinds. That is why peacemaking cannot be separated from the call to follow Jesus, to fit our own lives into his, and it’s also why we can risk our lives and reputations and our livelihoods in participating in the same work, because of the victory over death that Jesus has

demonstrated by his crucifixion and resurrection.

So following Jesus means being active peacemakers within ourselves, amongst one another in our homes and in the church, in our city and workplaces. It means being actively and publicly against poverty, injustice and war, and modelling the alternatives through practices like Matthew 18. It means actively and nonviolently resisting militarism and empire wherever it is found, whether in the world or in ourselves. Our world spent 1.3 trillion dollars last year alone on weapons solely designed to take human life. That's 26 times the amount that the World Bank has said we would need to solve absolute poverty. So as Christians we must speak out, we must be acting to resist this distortion of God's good creation.

And that's why with a group of fellow Christians I have been trying to do this, to speak out and to act out against the Iraq and Afghan wars. We've held vigils, we've written to politicians, we've held information nights, and we've taken nonviolent direct action to intervene ourselves against the killing and traumatising of our Afghan brothers and sisters.

But as Jesus warns us in this reading, we cannot undertake this call without expecting a backlash. If you love me, Jesus says, you will do as I've done, you'll love as I love, you'll do as I've commanded you to do. But then immediately he follows this up with, 'and I will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever.' This word paraclete is often translated helper or even advocate, sometimes comforter, but paraclete means literally Defence Counsel. Translators for some reason have tried to get away from what is the plain meaning of the word, but this is it. A paraclete is the person who stands next to you and defends you in a court of law. Jesus says he will give us another paraclete, another defence counsel, to be with you forever.

Now the first thing to note about this is that Jesus assumes that we need a Defence Counsel. In fact for the early Christians they frequently did. They were breaking all kinds of laws, laws about where they could go and couldn't go, who they could and

couldn't speak with, what they could and couldn't say. It's all through the New Testament.

For you it might not be a literal lawyer type Defence Counsel but it's a presence you need with you when you challenge authority, or break convention for justice and for love. It might mean keeping a brother or sister in the church accountable for their actions, knowing the Defence Counsel stands with you, or challenging a work colleague who is cutting corners.

But for me in trying to live this kind of love by nonviolently resisting war in our own backyard, my friends and I have actually been arrested several times for acts of calculated, carefully thought through civil disobedience, stepping onto military bases to interrupt further preparations for war, announcing with our presence that because of the resurrection we need no longer participate in systems of violence and death.

The second thing to note is that this need for a Defence Counsel seems to be connected to the kind of love that we are to live in Christ. That if we are to be about the Father's business, if we are to be doing the kinds of things that Jesus asks us to do we're likely to need some backup. Jesus is very explicit about this in Luke chapter 12, 'When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.' Now note that Jesus does not say to his followers 'If you happen to be accidentally misunderstood and they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities,' he says 'WHEN they bring you.' His disciples are to expect this as a result of the kind of subversive love they are to demonstrate publicly, enough to get them in trouble.

This has certainly been true for my friends and I as we've sought to resist the war in Afghanistan, as we've been brought before courts. We always refuse legal representation for this reason, out of obedience to Jesus – the understanding that our Defence Counsel is the Holy Spirit and that Spirit will speak through us. In fact last time we were in court we decided to take Jesus' advice in Luke 12 and not even

prepare a statement, just rely on the Holy Spirit to tell us what to say, to just speak with the Spirit of truth.

Because that's how Jesus describes this Defence Counsel, the Spirit of truth. The Defence Counsel is the one who speaks the truth about us and about the world. BUT, he says, know this: a world distorted by advertising and propaganda will not always recognise the truth even when it is told to its face. So we can expect a world that does not recognise the truth to tell us that what we are doing is wrong, that we have crossed unacceptable boundaries, that we have loved the wrong people, and will punish us accordingly.

But friends it's in this context, the context of Jesus saying that you must love like I love, and that will mean bearing costs when the world doesn't understand, it's in that context that Jesus says, 'my peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid...'

Just as Dr. King said the peace of God is not merely the absence of tension or difficulty. It is the presence of justice embodied in the Spirit acting with the believer.

Just like for Jesus and the apostles, ours is the kind of peace that only emerges in the midst of strife. Every one of the three times I've been placed in the police cells I've experienced this peace. The cells are a place where you have no privacy, no control over your environment, the TV is left blaring at high volume, there are no windows and the lights never go out. It's an atmosphere

about as far from peace as you can get. But friends the peace that I experienced there was unlike any other. Here, in the abandoned places, in powerlessness, the presence that Dr. King refers to as the cosmic companionship of Christ and John here refers to as our Defence Counsel, that presence was close enough to touch.

So we can expect trouble for making peace. But in the midst of that trouble, that is where the real peace of God is found.

Would you join me in this Pentecost prayer:

Come Holy Spirit of peace, lead us to the life of peace.

Come Holy Spirit of nonviolence, lead us to reject violence and practice active nonviolence.

Come Holy Spirit of compassion, lead us from revenge and retaliation to mercy and compassion.

Come Holy Spirit of forgiveness, lead us from anger and resentment to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Come Holy Spirit of hope, lead us from despair to hope.

Come Holy Spirit of truth, lead us from lies to truth.

Come Holy Spirit of love, lead us from hatred and fear and indifference to the fullness of love.

Come Holy Spirit of life, lead us to resist death and embrace life, to seek the God of peace.
