

“What Is to Be Done?”
Jeremiah 6:13-15, James 1:19-27, Luke 12:49-53
August 18, 2019

We were walking down Market Street in Saint Andrews, Scotland. It was October, and the two of us were new students at St. Marys College, studying Divinity. I was still getting used to the fact that not everyone in our school wanted to become clergy, since we were not enrolled in a Seminary granting a professional degree, but were pursuing an academic degree. And in the U.K. at least, Divinity is a foundational degree for a range of what are called the helping professions, such as social work, psychology, psychiatry, and so on.

But what really surprised me was a question from this classmate of mine as we were walking to the local chip shop on our way to get some fried haggis. Out of the blue, she asked if I really believed all this God-talk the professors were giving to us in class. Now, I had traveled over 3000 miles precisely because I wanted to hear all this God-talk. So I was shocked, to put it mildly - at least until I realized that most people our age - I had just turned 25 - either did not believe all that God-talk, or were at least skeptical about it. There was something different about studying religion and theology: most of the world just didn't think that way. And still doesn't. Maybe because it just doesn't seem practical, or doesn't jibe with Reality - whatever THAT is.

Part of the problem, of course, stems from the fact that so many words in normal speech do not carry the same meaning when scripture uses them. Take the word “peace,” for example.

The biblical idea of “peace” (as you probably already know) is not merely the absence of violence, like it is in English. Surely we remember that what most of the biblical prophets railed against wasn't mere violence, the kind with swords and spears and rock throwing by the enemy. But the prophets said that the real enemy was not only the guy in armor with a sling-shot, threatening to burn down your farm and steal your cattle. The real enemy were those who oppressed widows, denied the rights of orphans,

kept food from the mouths of the hungry, and did nothing to improve the lot of the naked. For the prophets of God, the continued, abiding realities of oppression, denial, hunger, and poverty showed that there was no peace. For the prophets of God, you could have safe highways, a calm populace, a secure political system, and crime-free streets. But that was not peace. Because anywhere that there is need, there is no peace. Any place there is resentment, there is no peace. Any place where there is injustice, depravity, exploitation there is a state of war - a war of humanity against itself.

And so the prophets of ancient Israel asked, what good is tranquility if it is kept by force? That is not peace. What benefit is quiet if it is guarded by oppression? That is not peace. What value is peace - peace at any price - if the price is surrender to the forces of evil, of darkness, of harm, of injury and foul play?

Ancient Israel was filled with false prophets who cried "Peace! Peace!" But as Jeremiah pointed out, there was no peace. The false prophets called for calm, and since God - apparently - was quiet, these false prophets proclaimed that God by his quietness obviously approved for all that was going on in the lives of the children of Israel. And to call for change was to risk upsetting the apple cart because, well, that's just the way it is, and some things will never change. Will they?

These are questions that have constantly bedeviled God's people, while the rest of the world looks on incredulously, wondering why in the world we don't settle for an absence of riotous unrest. To ask for anything more seems utopian - and therefore unobtainable. Better to preserve the status quo than to make waves.

So all this crazy scriptural language about turning the other cheek, or beating swords and spears into ploughshares and pruning hooks, is counter-productive. It is as if scripture has nothing to do with the real world. But not to believe this God-talk, as my classmate put it all those years ago in Scotland, risks missing the genius of the Gospel.

In our class called Practical Theology, one of the questions they had us ask ourselves was why we wanted to go into the ministry in the first place. After all, there is

something essentially different about being a Christian, or at least there should be. Many of my friends tell me that they cannot tell a Christian from a non-Christian half the time, seeing as the church has its share of horse-stealers, wheeler-dealers, and nay-sayers. Obviously, there is a great attraction to wanting to fit in, to go with the flow, to be part of the crowd, to go along to get along.

But every once in a while, we are reminded that the only way things are going to get better is if someone stands up and calls the rest of the world to account. Sometimes it might take a bullwhip in the Temple. At other times it might take posting 95 theses on the door of the church on a late October night. And still at other times it might take the saintliness of a monk like Francis, calling for love instead of hatred, for pardon in the face of injury, for hope instead of despair, for joy to replace sadness, and light to chase away the darkness.

For Saint Francis knew that where there is hatred, there is no peace. Despair is the opposite of peace. Darkness obscures the paths that lead to peace, and injury prevents us from walking in the paths of peace.

Those are the real enemies. These are the negatives against which the Apostle asks us to arm ourselves. Those are the realities against which we are to fight the good fight, for which we are to suffer as good soldiers in the cause of the Kingdom.

Like those of us who slow down our cars and rubber-neck in view of a horrific accident, isn't it a shame that matters often have to descend into chaos or violence to catch our eye and to claim our attention. It takes a Saddam Hussein, or a ruthless ayatollah, or a Kim Jong-Un, or a Vladimir Putin - you can pick the name of your favorite villain, it doesn't matter who it is - to stir us up to the point when we demand that something be done. If only we had heeded the words of the Epistle of James which reads: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this - to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." Then perhaps our world would not get to the point where we find ourselves today.

Peace will not come when the last guerilla lays down his arms, though we may pray hard for that day. Peace will not come when we scare the Chinese into becoming capitalists “just like us,” even though we may wish for that fervently. Peace will not come when the last automatic rifle is removed from the personal arsenals of our neighbors, even though for the life of me I cannot understand why any of us “need” such weaponry. In any case, you don’t need technology to give someone a good swift punch in the nose. Peace can only come when the whole of creation is healed, just as it was torn asunder back in the mists of time in that garden of a forgotten land called Eden.

God has been trying to heal it ever since. Yet we did not understand. And so God sent his Son to us. Yet many still will not listen. What will it take? A second coming? A new Jerusalem? That is God’s work. In the meantime, let us put on the whole armor of God, and as soldiers of Christ, let us witness to the need for God’s healing grace for our world.

Let us pray: