

Prince of Peace
Isaiah 2:2-5; Colossians 3:12-17
December 23, 2018

There are many things that I remember about my father, one of which was his characteristic manner of greeting, and leave-taking. His favorite salutation was a single word: “Peace.” Now, my father was not a “child of the 60’s,” nor was he some latter-day hippie born a generation too early. Maybe it was his service in Korea during the fighting there that led to his personal offer of Peace to everyone, even though he had volunteered to enter the Army in 1949 with the expressed purpose of doing his part in East Asia.

That word “peace” conjures up many images. “Can’t I get any peace?” says the exasperated parent when the kids have been running wild for a little too long. But what does a toddler or young child know about “holding one’s peace”?

Some of the ancient prophets of Israel had another complaint, based on the absence of peace. They observed that false prophets, speaking at the behest of evil kings rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, kept promising peace. “But,” intoned Jeremiah and Ezekiel, “But there IS no peace!” For the false prophets sought to lull the children of Israel into misplacing their trust in the princes alluded to in our Unison Reading this morning: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help: When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish!”

Then there is Jesus himself, hailed as the Prince of Peace by the prophet Isaiah. Yet Jesus proclaimed in Matthew’s Gospel that he came not to bring peace, but a sword! Jesus warned his followers that he would be the cause of divisions even within families, as mothers, fathers, and children all had to face personal decisions about who Jesus is, and what implications that would have as to how we live our own lives.

Perhaps you’ve heard of G. K. Chesterton, the British poet, playwright, and lay theologian who lived about 100 years ago. You may recognize him as the author of the

Father Brown mysteries that are seen periodically on Public Television. Chesterton was known in his day as the Prince of Paradox, and one of his most famous sayings might help demonstrate how he got his reputation. “The only thing wrong with Christianity,” he quipped around the year 1900, “is that nobody has even tried it yet.”

When we consider Jesus as the Prince of Peace and then look at the record which His Church has compiled over the last two thousand years, we might come to the conclusion that Chesterton may have been on to something. Now I’m not here to talk about some of our more obvious failings, such as the Crusades - though we could certainly entertain ourselves with the stories, told by the Christian Crusaders themselves, of how the blood was so deep in the slaughter that followed the conquest of the holy city of Jerusalem in the year 1099 that in places the blood reached up to the stirrups of the horsemen serving at the behest of the Pope and the Byzantines. These men said they were fighting in the service of the Prince of Peace. The mind boggles.

No, there are examples much closer to us in space and time. But I’m not here to rehearse them now. We have been around long enough; humanity has had the time to try different kinds of solutions to the problem of how to live in peace with one another. Yet somehow divisions and infighting have always resurfaced, whether among nations or within families. Jealousies always re-assert themselves, while envy lurks in the background, poisoning minds and spirits. Hatreds can be easily kindled, perhaps only exceeded by love of self which all too often stands in the way of peace and reconciliation. It’s almost enough to make you believe in Original Sin.

Does it always have to be like this? How much longer will we seemingly go out of our way to prove that Chesterton was right: that the only thing wrong with Christianity is that nobody has really tried it yet?

Back when the Apostle Paul was writing to the Christians who became known to the world as the Colossians, he used a type of language which English language translators seem to have avoided for some reason, and that was the language of the

sporting world. We can find it sprinkled throughout Paul's various epistles, such as when he talks about us not sinning - the verb he uses is "missing the bull's eye," taken straight from the world of archery. Paul also exhorts his fellow Christians to "run the race that is set before us," taken straight from the Greek culture that gave the world the idea of a competing in a 42 kilometer course known as a marathon. Thus, Paul sometimes described the ideal believer as being "fleet of foot," an odd-sounding phrase to our ears because its syntax is purely Semitic, but its semantics are entirely Hellenistic.

In our New Testament lesson this morning, Paul tells us that we should "let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts." But where our English says "rule," the original text says "let the peace of Christ be the umpire." Paul might not have been much of an athlete himself (the poor man could barely walk at times), but had he lived today I'm sure he would have made certain that ESPN was part of his cable package.

Now, if the peace of Jesus Christ is the umpire in anyone's heart, then, when feelings clash and life's circumstances pull us in two directions at the same time, the decision of our divine umpire, Jesus Christ, will keep us in the way of love. The way to right action is to appoint Jesus Christ as the arbiter between the conflicting emotions in our heart; and if we accept his decisions, we cannot go wrong. So is Paul telling not only the Colossians, but the rest of us who are privileged to eavesdrop through his letters.

Thus, every year around this time, which (we have been told) is the most wonderful time of the year, more than a few souls seem willing to give it another try. Because even though our love of self rebels against a faith that says the last shall be first, and the first shall be last - how could that possibly be fair? - and even though so many of our natural impulses go against the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the Prince of Peace, we know that there has got to be a better way, there has got to be something more to life than ourselves and the devices and desires of our own hearts. We rightfully suspect that there has got to be something better than what we call liberty but appears to be more and more like anarchy.

And so once again a number of souls, some brave, some timid, go looking for a Prince of Peace in a most unlikely place - a stable containing an animal's feeding trough, located in a remote corner of the world. For this Prince of Peace has promised not the peace that the world is incapable of giving to us anyway, but a true peace, an inner peace, in which we have the knowledge that one day, the kingdoms of this world will indeed become the Kingdom of our Lord and Christ.

Come, let us seek this Prince of Peace together. They say that he is come, even now. In Bethlehem.

Let us pray: