

Franciscan Peacemaking

Joyce CSF



We live in a time of war, violence and terrorism; peace does not feature much in the media. At the other end of the spectrum our hearts are warmed by the millions throughout the world who are committed to peace. Peace activists, committed to non-violence, are working in many areas where peace is not a reality.

What we are all seeking is not just the cessation of this violence, but a peace that is through and beyond violence - shalom - a peace that is not passive but active: that inner peace of the soul with God - the fulfilment of non-violence, through peaceful relationships with others and with ourselves, indeed with all creation; and the establishment of a just and peaceful social order, a peace that passes all understanding - God's peace.

To be a peacemaker is to receive this gift of God as part of our acceptance of God's love in Christ. Peace is one of the fruits of the Spirit given through the wounds of the crucified Christ in the new birth and promise of the risen Christ. The real peace we are all seeking is hidden deep within our hearts, where the Holy Spirit dwells, and needs to be unlocked, awakened by prayer.

Francis met the God of peace in the crucified Christ; by embracing the leper, by confronting the wolf of Gubbio and in the many acts of compassionate love recorded in his life and through his faithfulness to contemplative prayer. 'Walking in the footprints of Christ' meant for Francis the most intimate identification with Christ which culminated in his receiving in his own body the marks of the Crucified One, the Stigmata, the sign of his transformation through such prayer and action.

In the Old Testament there is perhaps no concept richer in meaning than shalom - the Hebrew word for peace. It possesses no single meaning, though it might be translated as inclusiveness, soundness, or wholeness. It encompasses far more than 'peace' as we commonly translate it into English. It is closely tied to justice, because it is the enjoyment or celebration of human relationships which have been made right with each other and with God - 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'.

More radically it involves love of one's enemies. When the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles from Jerusalem in despised Babylon he said 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare'. Often the peace of God appears utterly irrational, not only in the eyes of the streetwise, but in the eyes of the most religious people.

Peace is a central theme in the New Testament too, where Jesus the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, is the bearer, sign and instrument of God's peace.

If we believe with St Paul that Christ is our peace, peace is resolutely incarnational. It centres on humanity. Francis was convinced that a peaceable community can only be achieved if means and end are in harmony. He and his first brothers took to heart the gospel imperative for mission as expressed in Matthew chapter 10, as the Franciscan way of life, which embodies, among other things, the conviction that peace can only be achieved through peace. He had deep insight into the human person whom he viewed as the root cause of both violence and peace. He believed that peace begins in the heart. 'As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace in your heart ... Let everyone be drawn to peace and kindness through your peace and gentleness.'

To live in the Spirit of Christ, to live the life of Christ, is to live eucharistically, and the eucharist was a symbol of peace for Francis. 'I implore you brothers to show all possible reverence and honour to the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in whom that which is in heaven and on earth has been brought to peace and reconciled to Almighty God.'

His stand on not bearing weapons of any kind was another aspect of his attitude to peace; he recognised the connection between possessions and war. He prohibited the members of the Third Order to carry arms; he faced the Saracens, regarded as the enemies of Christianity, unarmed; and, in the legend of the Wolf of Gubbio, he faced the wolf unarmed. He negotiated a peace treaty between the wolf and the townspeople with spectacular results!

Through our profession as brothers and sisters it is incumbent on us to be peacemakers and, like Francis, to desire to embody as individuals and as a community the attitudes to peace that Francis sought and taught in his lifetime. We have all witnessed the association of Assisi with peace, politically and religiously - a tribute to the outstanding example of Francis. History bears witness to the fact that he succeeded in establishing peace in various Italian cities, and the Canticle of the Creatures sings of the reconciliation of civil and religious authorities in Assisi.

We need to be searching for ways to deepen our commitment to peace, expressed in a variety of ways and manifested actively in however small a way. I never could have imagined that I would spend almost a month in a Muslim village on the West Bank with a small group of women in the International Women's Peace Service witnessing the humiliation of the Palestinians under occupation. I learned something of the people of peace on both sides of that complex conflict; I met many men and women risking their lives as peace activists, and I was humbled as I thought of the privileges and the security which I take for granted at home.

May we all persevere in making our contribution; this is urgent in a world which seems hell-bent on achieving peace through violence. When will we ever learn that violence begets only violence, whether in our community houses, in our country, or on the scale of a 'war on terrorism'?

May the Lord give me peace. May the Lord give them peace. May the Lord give you peace. *f*

This is a shortened version of the Franciscan Lecture given by Sister Joyce, Minister General of CSF, to the Annual Brothers' Meeting at Hilfield Friary, June, 2006.