

Easter III, April 15, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton A poem by R.S. Thomas, 1 John 3: 1-7, Luke 24: 36b-48

This is my child;
that is yours. Let
peace be between them
when they grow up.

They are far off
now; let it not
be through war they are brought
near. Their languages

are different. Let them both
learn....[that] peace
in the hand is the translation
of peace in the mind.

R.S. Thomas

I found myself conflicted this weekend. We all know what happened in Syria on Friday, and I wrote about it in my column in the weekly E-pistle.

War is always a general challenge for Christians, because violence in any form is antithetical to Jesus' core value of peace-making.

The further challenge for us as Christians comes in the specifics, in the details of violent moments. How are we to respond when it's clear to all of us that we are confronted with outright evil acts, such as the poison gassing of innocent civilians – innocent men, women, and children. Should we applaud – or, at least, acknowledge as appropriate – the judicious use of force if it's intended to message likely more significant consequences should the evil actors fail to discontinue their outrageous behavior? And if every effort is made to avoid casualties?

In our complex world, these are hard questions to answer for any person of faith, and especially for any Christian, since we have committed ourselves to follow the Prince of Peace.

Can violence – can war – be just? This isn't a new question, and it's not only a question for Christians. The first known discussion of just war theory appears in the Hindu epic the Mahabharata (Mey-HA-BAR-ete), the origins of which were contemporaneous with the Jewish 8th B.C. Century prophets.

For Christians, Just War Theory, or Just War Doctrine began with Augustine of Hippo in the 4th Century, and was greatly expanded by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century. Today, the core and premise of Just War Theory/Doctrine is that war, while terrible, is not always the worst option. And, today, when military conflict is so much more complex and is no longer subject to easy definition, it might be as well to talk about "Just War and Conflict Theory/Doctrine."

Here's a brief summary of what this theory/doctrine says for justifying going to war, or taking military action: the cause must be just, those who begin it must have the appropriate legal authority to do so, they have exercised all options for dialogue and negotiation before acting, their intentions must be ethically right, there is clear evidence that they are likely to succeed, and that the act of going to war or entering into a conflict is a last resort.

Once conflict has begun, peace must be a central motive even in the midst of violence, and significant ethical limits remain in place, such as not attacking innocents or killing hostages, engaging in intentional mass rape, or using poison gas.

For us as Christians, if there is a failure in any of the areas I've described, that the war, conflict, or action is unjust.

I've taken the time to share this with you because I believe that to ignore on a Sunday morning, when we are worshipping, what's happening in our world outside this place, is to marginalize and discount the Christian perspective on everything that happens outside this place AND to devalue our own faith to ourselves. We can't pick and choose what we'll apply normative standards of Christian behavior to; we can't turn a blind eye to some things but not to other things. It really is all or nothing.

At the same time, while what we do in here should form what we do outside of here, we shouldn't allow what happens outside here to disrupt or warp what happens in here!

In here, we come to re-charge for out there. In here we celebrate sacred moments that – if we allow them – will transform us.

In here, today, we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, and the gifts it has to offer us.....and the demands it puts upon us.

The gifts – or, perhaps, The Gift from which all other gifts flow – is new life. The gifts (as, for instance, St. Paul outlines them in his letters) include love, joy, and peace.

The demands include that we live in such a way that the gifts can find a home in us.

It would be hard to argue that peace can find a home in us if love is not present; that joy can find a home in us if peace and love are not present.

Seems like peace – it's absence, and it's presence – is a constant theme today! The gospel passage is all about it, and so is that first reading by R. S. Thomas. He was a Celt, born in Cardiff in 1913; an Anglican priest of the Church in Wales who served parishes all across that country; a fellow-alumnus with me of the University College of North Wales in Bangor, and – among many other things – a life-long poet – he published over 1500 poems, and wrote many more.

The first reading is one of them. How appropriate that – though chosen long ago – it should be about peace!

For the Celts, there are two meanings to the word “peace.” One means “the absence of war.” The other meaning is “inner tranquility, ease of spirit.” Both are central, and inter-related – and to be fully “at peace” you need both.

When the two come together I think the best description I’ve heard is “deep peace.” Each week, when we pray during the healing service, we ask that all for whom we pray, and we ourselves, may “know the deep peace of Christ.”

It echoes an ancient Celtic blessing:

Deep peace of the running wave to you
Deep peace of the flowing air to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you
Deep peace of the shining stars to you
Moon and stars pour their healing light on you
Deep peace of Christ the light of the world to you
Deep peace of Christ to you

That, I think, is the peace R. S. Thomas speaks of – that to have the peace in the hand, the outward and visible expression of peace between us, we first must have the inner tranquility, the ease of spirit, that is peace in the mind.

That is the expansive peace we have to offer to our world; it begins deep inside us. Only when we are at peace with ourselves can we be at peace with each other; only when we know peace can we hope to share it with our world.

In the end, the sort of peace we hope for in our world and for our world begins with us, begins deep inside us – it is the deep peace of Christ that can transform us, if we let it. *The Deep peace of Christ to you.*