

Hammer or Heart

Proper 15 C

St Augustine's

18 August 2013

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." – Luke 12.51

By Fletcher Davis

Last Wednesday hundreds were killed and thousands were wounded in Egypt. Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohamad ElBeredai resigned as interim vice president in protest saying, "We have reached a state of harder polarization and more dangerous division ... because violence only begets violence."

Is that the kind of division Jesus came to bring? It's jarring to hear the Prince of Peace say he has not come to bring peace but division. Some say that's the most difficult verse in the Bible. Why on earth would he say that? What are we to make of it? What about "turn the other cheek"? [Mt 5.39] Let's take a look. [Today's Gospel: Luke 12.49-56]

First, the whole New Testament makes clear that Jesus' deepest longing and firmest intention is to bring God's peace. "Blessed are the peacemakers," he says in the Sermon on the Mount, "for they will be called children of God." [Mt 5.9]

Luke tells us that at Jesus' birth, Zechariah greeted him as the one who came "to guide our feet into the way of peace." [1.79] At the other end of his life, when someone cut off a slave's ear and others reached for their swords, Jesus said, "No more of this." [Lk 22.31], a plea for peace that echoes through the centuries. After his resurrection, Jesus greets his terrified apostles: "Peace be with you." [Jn 20.19]

His plea for peace resonates in the early Church as well. In his very first letter Paul advises, "Be at peace among yourselves." [1 Thess 5.13] In another letter he says, "Agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." [II Cor 13.11] And in his final letter he counsels, "Let us then pursue what makes for peace." [Rom 14.19]

Second, maybe the division Jesus refers to is in our own hearts, in our struggle to put God instead of self. I remember with a smile one time when I preached about making our primary loyalty to Christ instead of to our family or some lesser love. At the coffee hour after the service the police chief's wife challenged me, saying she could never do that: her first priority was and always would be her family.

A few weeks later at his final confirmation class, her son informed me that he would not be present for his Confirmation on Friday because his baseball team had a championship game that night. Two other confirmands were also on that team. All three had the same conflict.

I told them that there would be many other baseball games to play but they might not get another chance for Confirmation. "But," I said, "if you are confirmed, you are an adult in the eyes of the Church, so I'll leave the decision to you." They went home, and I waited for the phone to ring.

I was especially nervous about what the chief might say – he was a forceful man, a plain speaker and a fierce supporter of his kids' athletic achievements. Sure enough, about 20 minutes later the phone rang. It was the chief. He addressed me in his booming baritone, "Father Davis?" He paused. I took a deep breath and said, "Yes."

"Did you tell my boy that he couldn't play ball next Friday night?" I said, "No sir. I told him he had to make the choice between the ball game and Confirmation." He roared, "Well, he going

for the Confirmation instead of the game.” Again he paused. “Just wanted to tell you how proud I am of him - and of you for making him choose.” That choice comes to all of us.

Third, at the very heart of Christian faith is our thirst for peace. Getting to peace does require difficult choices and risks division. We may long for peace, but instead we learn to fight, to stand up for ourselves, our kin and kind, even if it requires violence. But who teaches us how to strive for peace?

Jesus does. He makes it clear that dedicating ourselves to God’s peace means passionately pursuing the quest for God’s peace, even knowing that it may well lead to division with those near and dear to us.

The word for division that Luke uses in today’s gospel, “*diamerismón*,” connotes discord, even hostility. In today’s first lesson, Jeremiah asks, “Is not my word like a fire, says the Lord, and like hammer that breaks a rock into pieces?” [23.29] Jesus echoes that hammer image when he says he came to bring division. Division is not what we desire or strive to attain, but we sure know the feeling.

The word peace is the opposite of division in our day. It has come to mean freedom from conflict. But that’s new. Jesus probably used the Hebrew word “shalom” for peace, meaning everything that makes for someone’s highest good, well-being and fulfillment. It never means only the absence of trouble.

Nor does it mean passive acceptance of evil in order to avoid division. Shalom, calls us to put Christ’s love at the top of our values and work for all that makes for the good of others. It makes no room for prejudice, greed or selfishness.

A PhD engineer who made hydrogen bombs for a living greeted me after a sermon on peace saying with a twinkle, “You know, Father Davis, if they declare peace, I’m out of a job!” Well, some people won’t welcome peace. But some values are worth the struggle: compassion, freedom, justice, peace.

When we exchange the peace and say, “The peace of the Lord be always with you,” it means, May the ideal state of happiness, health and harmony be with you. Which do you prefer – division or peace? Hammer or heart?

Fourth and finally, the source of shalom is always and only God. It cannot be wrought by the likes of you and me. That’s what it means when we call Jesus the Prince of Peace: he knew shalom even in the agony of the Cross, and he promised it as a gift to us - “Shalom I leave with you,” he said, “my shalom I give to you.” [Jn 14.27]

Frederick Buechner, reflecting on this mystery of how the Prince of Peace can bring division, writes, “The contradiction is resolved when you realize that for Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love.” [“Listening to Your Life,” Harper San Francisco, 1992, p 240]

Our takeaway today has to do with precisely that. Does our love extend only to ourselves? Or does it reach out to embrace others – friend and foe alike? Then comes the rub: does it place love of Christ above all other loves? That can cause conflict with both our own desires and other people, but it’s the only road to true peace, to the shalom of Christ.

So here’s our challenge. Will we make Christ’s love and compassion our own? When he saw the sick, the blind or anyone else in distress, he was moved with compassion. When he

encountered anyone in pain, whatever else was on his agenda, he always stopped to extend a hand of help and a heart of love. In all our afflictions, he is afflicted.

And when he prayed for shalom, he prayed that others would find the true peace that comes only as a gift from God. But there are two parts to every gift. There is what is offered, and there is what is received. So my prayer today is that, whatever the cost, we will all *accept* God's gift of shalom – then share it *copiously*.