

When my children were small there were some bedtime stories that they asked for over and over again. Inevitably they were not always the ones I liked best. There was one though that I related to really well, it was called Five Minutes Peace. It was about a mother elephant attempting to get some time alone away from her children, and for the most part failing as she was repeatedly interrupted, even in the bath.

There are times when we long for a bit of peace, but peace is one of those words whose meaning slips and slides around. Do we mean an absence of noise? - that blissful feeling when the pneumatic drill outside the house finally stops. Do we mean the cessation of demands upon our time? – lying by a swimming pool on holiday. Do we mean an absence of conflict and war? – now that’s a more serious meaning of peace!

Serious or not, these are all negatives, the removal of something unwelcome or harmful. What is the positive? When Jesus says to his disciples ‘peace be with you’, does he mean ‘I hope you have a nice quiet time without any aggro’? No, he is bestowing peace, not an absence of something, but something positive, something real.

The Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Spinoza wrote in his Political treatise about the Best State of a Dominion: *Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice*. Does that hold true for an individual as well as for a nation? And is that what Jesus is bestowing – a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence and justice?

Read the prophet Isaiah and you will find that peace and justice are closely linked, but he is writing about the nation, about society. When we read the gospels, the example that Jesus gives us demonstrates justice and benevolence – he cares about the poor, he has compassion on those who are grieving, those who are in pain or excluded from society because they are deaf or blind. But still I don’t think this gets to the heart of what Jesus is offering. It includes this, but it is also much more than this. The clues to the nature of this peace comes once more from the descriptions we have of Jesus, of his own life.

Jesus was frequently tired, he often had to withdraw to get away from the people’s demands, he was moved to tears, he was let down by his friends, betrayed, he was beaten and whipped and finally crucified. Yet despite this, only once, when he cried out the words of psalm 22 from the cross, do we get any sense that he is not at peace. He is the still point, the calm around which storms rage;

he is solid, immovable, the house built upon the rock. His peace, this mysterious quality that he bestows upon the disciples, is being at one with God. Nothing gets in the way of that relationship.

If you have ever done something wrong and attempted to keep it a secret you will know how destructive it is of a relationship. There is no peace. Once, many years ago, when I drove a bright green 2CV, I was leaving a friend's house and in reversing I gently hit another car. I looked to see what if any damage I had caused. The whole wing on her car was crushed, but there was not a mark on the 2CV. As you only had to breathe on the 2CV to dent it I thought I couldn't have caused that so I drove off. I woke in the middle of the night in a sweat. What if I had caused it? Why did I drive off. It would have been so easy to go back into the house and speak to her. I lay awake all night until I could ring her in the morning, dreading the conversation. I then confessed, but it was all right – she had crashed into something a few days previously. My little bump had caused no further damage. There was no way I could have maintained my friendship with her if I had not owned up. To have attempted to live with a secret like that would have changed me, and not for the better.

So it is with our relationship with God. When we do wrong, or fail to do right, we damage or even destroy our relationship with God and we damage ourselves. We are changed, and not for the better. What Jesus offers us is peace, peace with God, restored relationship that comes with forgiveness. If we own up, everything will be OK. This is the meaning of the cross, of Christ's death and resurrection. We no longer see Christ, or hear him, but he gives us his peace. Not an absence of war, or an absence of bother or noise, but the reality of a rock firm relationship with God, a relationship that can survive anything. And from that place of security flows out ability to work for justice, to become forgiving, to be benevolent and compassionate, to love as we are loved.

We celebrate this gift every time we come to communion. All these who are being admitted to communion today receive the peace of Christ. It will not take away sorrow or pain, it will not mean they never argue or are always well behaved, but it will mean that their relationship with God, the one who holds this world in existence, is always repairable. Nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us from the love of God. Amen.