

The Peace that Passes Understanding

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Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6-7, RSV)

The Editors have asked me to pause from my stressful life to write a piece about peace. And not just any kind of peace, but the kind that passes understanding. My wife coolly remarked that that was impossible, and I was a fool to get into such a trap—trying to say something understandable about the peace that passes understanding.

The very topic burdens me with guilt. I ought to be more at peace. I ought to relax more, meditate more, let up more. I don't live enough out of the "still point of the turning world," where nothing moves while everything orbits round it. I ought to trust God more. Am I alone in this? Do I hear a few "Amens" out there? Aren't we clergy among the most stressed people in our society? Does any group know *less* about this incomprehensible peace of God? Does any group have less right to preach about it? Then compound that with the greatest threat the world has ever known to peace—nuclear war—and the quandry over this text flips into an absolute proof of its claim: such peace is indeed beyond our understanding.

But that is a spot we are accustomed to begin in, week after week. We are not worthy of these things, as Paul says in another place. We never understand fully. Our lives are always light-years from exemplifying the truth we are bound to proclaim. So, once again, we silence our objections, and listen. . . .

There is no need to worry. (All subsequent scriptural references will be taken from the Jerusalem Bible.) Right. That's already part of what worries me—that so many people still aren't worried! In my travels I have found, especially in the South, many clergy who simply don't want to face the nuclear threat. Old orthodoxies about deterrence, the logic of which no longer fits a first strike strategy, lull them into a restless sleep. Many of them pastor churches rife with military-industrial employees. They have resolutely resisted the temptation to read Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* or Helen Caldicott's *Nuclear Madness*, or anything else that might require rethinking or action. We don't want to have to worry. We've lived with this nightmare for thirty-eight years now; that's half a lifetime of low-level stress, and you don't lightly stir up all the radioactive dust of that memory. So we find ways to stay busy.

If only that were the whole of the problem! Then we could believe that our efforts to awaken each other would finally pay. Look how fast the nuclear movement has grown in just a year and a half! Now over seventy percent of

the nation favors a freeze. Surely that will begin to translate into policy, and we can go back to other things.

But there is a deeper problem. Have you ever met anyone who was not for peace? But the world has known precious little of it. What is it in the human being that makes peace so illusive? We desire peace, but *we in fact need war*. We have needed wars to end our depressions and get the nations working again. Wars are fabulous consumers. Never mind that they wreck long-term stability; they provide short-term “fixes,” and the profits from them are enormous.

We also need wars because we need enemies. As long as people generally remain unconscious of their own shadow-side, they will continue to project out on “enemies.” And where there is no enemy they will invent one. The Soviets are our scapegoat. They catch our projections. We can imagine ourselves to be essentially good if we can find someone else out there whom we can picture as essentially evil.

When my wife and I were in South America for four months last spring, it was fascinating to see how the old red-baiting trick that Senator McCarthy taught the world gets used. Everytime priests or nuns or laity organized to protest policies that were exploiting the poor, they were branded “communists.” Marcos uses the same ploy in the Philippines, and now Reagan has ingeniously discovered that all us folks who simply want to survive and secure a future for our kids are “communist inspired”! (He should really be more careful—he makes it sound as if only Communists want the world to survive!). Yes, we need our scapegoats—let’s make Reagan one! We need someone to blame for all this. And since there’s not much sign that folks are ready to abandon this simplistic solution, and face their own darkness, and learn to love the Russians, there’s not much hope for peace.

And Paul says, “Don’t worry”!

That’s not all. We need war also because it’s been one of the few catalysts powerful enough to shake most people into life. Of course, in war many more die, but that can’t be helped. Why do so many men look back nostalgically at their experience in war—preferably earlier wars that the nation threw itself into without doubt? Because there were moments then when danger drove them to a kind of presence and communion with their buddies or to acts of heroism and selflessness that they had never been able to rise to in their normal lives—and never have since. Is it not the case that most people, most of the time, are all too much at peace—or better, asleep? Is it not the case that when we say “peace” we usually mean an absence of conflict, a state of inertia, the cessation of responsibility, tension, polarity, dynamic: in short, everything that makes life vital? Yet we know from experience that most of our real growth has come through conflict. That operation we had, or illness, or death or divorce or kid on drugs, or alcoholic spouse or disability or danger or social controversy: those were the (unpeaceful) moments when we dared to face and even to let go of our most deeply-seated egotisms, our most selfishly clutched possessions, our need for status, privilege, credentials, even perhaps our fear of death. How many of us, and for how much of the time, are able to live alert to our higher selves, by virtue of inner discipline? And if, or when, we will not, is

it not the case that we trust in outer events to do it for us?

Despite all our prayers for peace, there is an inner wisdom—the part of us that drives for wholeness, individuation, the image of God—that knows it cannot settle for the somnolent life of fractional living. Deep within us there is something that, if it cannot trust us to awaken ourselves to it, calls out for calamities, emergencies, conflict, or war. This is best put in an unlikely source, Geoffrey Hodson's *The Brotherhood of Angels and Men* [Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, (1927) 1982]:

Your higher selves—your angel selves—strive continually to awaken you, to send a vision through your dreams, and here and there a sleeper stirs and stretches, all too often to return to sleep; your dreams must be disturbed by the force of things external to your selves. Wars come to rouse you, and you pray to God to save you from more wars! Pestilence and famine stride hand in hand across your heedless lives, and only as you see them threatening your repose do you awake, and, for a time, become your greatest selves. Yet from these, you pray unto your Lord, asking Him to deliver you! The deliverer from these is with you all the while, it is your innermost self; but as you will not be aroused by the Self within you, you must be awakened by the Self without. Know that in wars, plagues, cataclysms, you see yourselves, the expressions of your soul, striding torch in hand, through the dormitories in which your bodies lie, to stir you from your sleep, to drive away the dark shadows of self-satisfaction and content. These other selves of yours will come again and again until you yourselves banish them for all time. They go from the nation, from those men, who, answering to the highest, live according to its laws; who seeing the greatest, strive ever to express it, who neither rest nor sleep, filled with a craving which drives them onwards from peak to peak of the mountains of the spiritual world. That is the way to release, brothers, and there is none other. He who tells you that war may cease by act of law, does worse than lie; he covers up the truth, so that men, feeling safe, sink back again into their dreams—and war returns in due season.

And Paul says “Don’t worry”! If at the conscious level we are intent on blocking all knowledge of the nuclear suicide we are so painstakingly preparing for ourselves, and at the unconscious level still need an enemy to blame all our own problems on, and long for war to ease our boredom and wake us to our own heroic possibilities, what chance has the slim shoot of peace of growing to maturity when the soil is so laced with salt? Don’t worry, indeed!

To all of which Paul responds piously, “Pray.” *But if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving.* I have concluded that it makes no sense to argue about whether praying would do any good or not, or telling stories *ad nauseum* of answered prayer. We simply have to do it. Nothing can save us that is possible anyway. We might as well surrender ourselves to God’s impossible possibility. Nowadays it’s the only game left in town.

It is not, after all, inconceivable that humanity could freeze, then reduce, and finally destroy the nuclear stockpiles that we have so long prayed and sup-

plicated with all thanksgiving to give us peace. It is not at all impossible. It merely seems improbable, unlikely, far-fetched, given our record. So what; everybody God works with has a record. Moses was wanted for murder, Abraham for lying to Pharoah about not being married to Sarah, Jacob for theft of birthright, David for adultery, the prophets for sedition and Paul for disturbing the "peace." We all have records, some earned in the line of duty, some earned for refusing our duty. God is not picky about who can be used. What if the real heroism of our time were already beckoning to us in the glistening sheen of our lethal warheads? What if we faced the issue dead-on and called people to the longest stride of soul they ever took—to risk everything for peace? What if we got off of generalities down to specifics, and organized levels of involvement all the way from letter writing to jail? What if, in short, we helped prevent war by absorbing that old unconscious *need* for war to wake us up to our duty before God and the future of our children?

And what if, at the same time, we courageously faced that inner shadow, and owned our own evil? What if each church or town were to adopt a similar church or town in Russia, and exchanged letters, even visits, to bond themselves into a common humanity? Then that old need to scapegoat the Russians would stick in people's throats, or get them laughed off the podium. Because we would *know* our "enemies" as flesh of our flesh, in the same substantial struggle to survive.

And what if we did all this, not with a grim determination and fearful urgency, but bouyed up by *thanksgiving*, trusting that God can do far more than we can ask or think, living in expectation of miracle? What if we let *God* bear the issue, and we responded out of grateful hearts that God, in infinite mercy, has freed us from our nuclear paralysis and given us tasks we can do? Then indeed we would work with desperate urgency, perhaps, but not without hope or joy. Then we might incur controversy and even imprisonment, but not the dread sense of impotence. Then we might know what it means to have our *hearts and thoughts* (or *bodies*) *guarded in Christ Jesus*, no longer assaulted by unconscious fear and torn by unconscious needs for war. Then, guarded and thankful, we might even discover *the peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, which will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*.