

Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Matthew 5:9

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St Martin-in-the-Fields has two patron saints, and we might as well acknowledge it. The first is St Martin. You might imagine the other one is the Fields—but you’d be wrong. The unofficial second patron is the man with whom the renaissance of St Martin’s is most associated, who served as vicar 1914-26, and who began the homeless ministry and the radio broadcasts with the BBC. His name was Dick Sheppard. Both of our patrons were involved in wars but died as pacifists. Both were celebrated men whose deeds became the stuff of myth and legend. Both are most famous for their actions in relation to the poor. Together they epitomise all that’s good but also all that’s unresolved in the identity and mission of St Martin-in-the-Fields.

Let’s start with St Martin. He was a man of great courage: when he came to believe that he could no longer be both a soldier and a Christian, he refused to fight and was imprisoned accordingly. He even planned to go unarmed into the heat of battle, but the cessation of hostilities led to his being released. He was a man of great piety: he founded monasteries and spread the faith to friend and stranger. He was a man of great prophetic witness: emperors would refuse to see him because he was forever demanding mercy for prisoners that the emperors didn’t want released. His action in dividing his cloak and sharing half with a beggar remains an inspiring image of how to care for oneself and for the needy at the same time. He was widely influential: the people who cared for fragments of his famous cloak were called cappellani, known in French as chaplains; and the small temporary buildings that housed those fragments were known as capelli, or chapels. He became the patron saint of France.

Let’s now turn to Dick Sheppard. His commitment to the poor predated his time at St Martin’s: he’d served at Oxford House in Bethnal Green for two periods. He’d been a chaplain at the front and was instrumental in establishing the annual Albert Hall Festival of Remembrance. He was the first great religious broadcaster, his preaching drew huge crowds, he founded the Christmas Appeal, his ever-open door brought solace to the destitute, he made St Martin-in-the-Fields a household name, and he had the courage to campaign for an end to war in the face of deep cynicism and hostility. Over 100,000 people filed past his coffin as it lay in state at St Martin’s. On the day of his funeral at St Paul’s Cathedral, the pavements of Central London were thronged with mourners. The feminist Vera Brittain wrote, “To all who cared about spiritual values, the shock of Dick Sheppard’s death to his country was comparable to the blow dealt to India a decade later by the death of Gandhi.”

What’s not to like about Martin of Tours and Dick Sheppard? Well the problem with Martin is his whole legacy is focused on that one moment, his sharing his cloak with a beggar who in his dream that night was revealed to be Jesus. While this legend is inspiring, it encourages a culture where discipleship is a matter of dramatic, spontaneous, unrepeatable acts of charity. It’s like turning a whole institution into a catchy 30-second YouTube video. It means we talk in idealised terms of an ever-open door, when the truth is we’ve never had an ever-open door; and while the slogan is

compelling, the reality would be tyrannical and unsustainable. It means we hold one another to unattainable goals and feel outwardly deceitful and inwardly guilty for not meeting them.

As for Dick Sheppard, he was a whirlwind of energy and infectious practical action... except when he wasn't. His was a boom-and-bust ministry of passion and exhaustion, of aspiration and asthma attacks, of frantic events and crushing fatigue. If we follow this model, we suggest peace in the world can come only at the cost of peace in our own soul. We assume a distant God whose heart can only be bought by the sacrificial offering of our own breakdowns. The last hundred years of ministry at St Martin-in-the-Fields have often looked all too much like Dick Sheppard's life: faithful, frantic, and fragile.

So this is the question for us as a community one hundred years after the institution as vicar of Dick Sheppard, around 800 years after our foundation as a church, and nearly 1700 years after the birth of St Martin: how do we embody the gospel, how do we turn our heritage and identity into mission and ministry, without substituting the grand gestures for the small fidelities and without trying to appease God with the sacrament of our own exhaustion?

Jesus looked out over Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and said, "If you, even you, had only recognised the things that make for peace!" But what were those things? That's the question we're trying to answer at St Martin's. Having highlighted the warnings that lie in our two patrons, I want to see what we can learn from them.

Let's start with Martin. After he was done with being a soldier and an abbot, Martin became a bishop. Today Tours is a provincial town in the west of France. But in Martin's day, its diocese included places as far away as Chartres, Paris, Autun, and Vienne. It covered a huge area. Martin visited each church once a year by donkey, by boat, or on foot. He organised a parish system. He's remembered for his grand gesture with the cloak and his renunciation of war, but a lot of his time went into administration and communications. This is a challenging lesson for St Martin-in-the-Fields. We're proud of the record of the great things that have been done here, and we want to do lots more of them. We're delighted that other institutions and churches visit and want to learn from what we do. But to make a sustainable community where we don't become overstretched and exhausted or broke and broken means paying careful attention to every detail of our administration, premises, staff, finance, management, and governance—all the unflashy and unfashionable things. We've made becoming an exemplary organisation one of our three goals for the next few years because we've realised that we have as much to offer the wider church in how we do things as in what we do.

St Martin is famous for giving his cloak to a beggar. But in the story, he actually gives *half* his cloak to a beggar. That's a rather more sustainable form of charity. John Wesley said, "Consider yourself the first among the poor you are called to serve." It's a very helpful philosophy. Jesus calls us to love others as we love ourselves. That means loving ourselves. One of the biggest challenges at St Martin-in-the-Fields is matching together many people's welcome but nonetheless unrealistic wishes and projections for us to be a miraculous organisation that does nothing but sacrificial good works, with a more pragmatic estimation of what running an institution actually requires. One literary critic points out that in a romance, no one ever enquires who pays for the hero's accommodation. We're not living in a romance. We want to be a

great organisation—but not at the expense of being a good one.

The attention to detail St Martin gave to administration is something we all need to imitate when it comes to making peace. There's only one way to make peace, and that's to put more energy and attention into the details of peace than the war-makers put into waging war. How could it ever be any different? Peace isn't achieved with a spliff of cannabis, a finger V sign, and a "Make love not war" tie-dyed T-shirt. It takes years of practice. One practitioner, Ched Myers, speaks of four ways to be a peacemaker.

The first is peacebuilding. This is about negotiation, which he describes as "the ideal form of conflict transformation." You negotiate all the time in domestic, neighbourhood, and workplace settings. To build peace you need to be aware of and be able to articulate your own interests. You need to get into the habit of listening to those with whom you're in tension. You need to become adept at finding common ground. And you need to be willing to see compromise as an achievement and not a failure. But peacebuilding isn't the answer to every kind of conflict. Its chief limitation is that it assumes an equality of power. Peacebuilding doesn't work if your adversary has huge phalanxes of economic, military, or social power behind them. It only works if you can meet them face to face on level terms.

Hence the second approach, which is peacemaking. When there isn't enough trust to sit down face to face, it's time for mediation. If the balance of power between the parties is starkly uneven and felt adversely to be so, it may be time for facilitated dialogue. Of course that depends on the parties being willing to enter such a process. In peacemaking the work is still primarily done by the parties in conflict. The process is about the adversaries arriving at their own points of convergence rather than looking to the third party to make any judgement.

But sometimes the parties are unwilling or unable to meet with one another. This situation calls for peacekeeping. Arbitration is required. A third party is appointed as an adjudicator, listens to the perspectives of each adversary, and makes a definitive judgement. This is how the Western legal system works. United Nations peacekeeping forces and Truth and Reconciliation commissions work to this model.

However there's a fourth approach which Myers calls peacewaging. This refers to situations where the conflict is in full swing, there's no question of turning to third parties, and there's every expectation that the party with the greater force will prevail. Here Myers draws on the distinctions made by the Brazilian Catholic archbishop between three kinds of violence. Violence # 1 is structural poverty—radical inequality in land ownership, corporations driving indigenous peoples out in order to log their rainforests, racism, arms sales that shored up a dictatorship, police harassment, linguistic suppression, and so on. Violence # 2 is furious response to such conditions. Introjected rage includes teen suicide, addictions, eating disorders, depression. Projected rage includes attacking those near at hand—domestic violence, petty crime, bar fights, school shootings—or those perpetrating injustice. If conscientisation has taken place, this may issue as organised protest or guerrilla warfare. Structural violence does not justify reactive violence, but it does make it inevitable. Those who have no knowledge or comprehension of # 1 are likely to have little sympathy or tolerance for # 2. Violence # 3 is the swift, severe, and final governmental reaction to "the rage of the marginalised, the antisocial, or the subversive." Such coercion often appears to those cushioned from injustice as necessary to uphold law and order. The

result of #3 is invariably to intensify the misery of #1. Peacewaging means adopting thoughtful tactics ranging from passive non-cooperation (including boycotts, strikes, and refusal of orders) to active resistance (such as sit-ins, nonviolent sabotage, and civil disobedience). The point of such nonviolent struggle is to unmask injustice, impede continuing oppression, and exert moral pressure on the adversary to negotiate social and political change.

Now you see what I mean by saying you have to go into peace in more detail than those who go to war. Jesus didn't just show up in Jerusalem and get into a panic when he realised Pilate, Herod, and Caiaphas were in charge. He knew exactly what he was doing. His donkey derby and turning the tables were precisely the kinds of gestures Myers is talking about—gestures that unmasked power and displayed an alternative kingdom. The result is that his cross is everywhere today while the Roman Empire is long gone. That's what it means to walk in the steps of St Martin.

Turning to Dick Sheppard, we'd all like to believe that what made St Martin-in-the-Fields famous was the beauty of its architecture, its location on Trafalgar Square, its truly amazing congregation, and its reputation for social care. But the truth is what made St Martin's famous was broadcasting. In the 1920s and 1930s people didn't have TVs, let alone computers. They gathered reverently around their wireless sets. Dick Sheppard and St Martin's were famous because they were on the radio all the time. By 1951 a third of the entire population was listening to evening services broadcast from St Martin's. This brought many opportunities, not least the chance to turn the Academy of St Martin in the Fields into an overnight success from its founding in 1958. But it also brought two challenges which are still with us.

One is, if you're going to be on the radio or TV all the time, you've got to have something to say. What is it St Martin's has got to say? It can't be simply that the rich should be less rich, the poor should be less poor, and the government should do something about it. The challenge of broadcasting is that St Martin's must articulate where in its common life, where in its presence with the poor, and where in its striving for sustainable ministry it has come face to face with God and what it has seen. And the second challenge of broadcasting is that if people hear you all the time putting the world to rights, they're going to look back at you sooner or later and see if your own practice matches up to your principles. Which brings us back to the quality of our common life, being a community that lives forgiveness and anticipates the life everlasting, that strives to be not afraid and embodies both the humanity and the divinity of Christ.

And the final lesson of both Dick Sheppard and St Martin is this. Dick Sheppard was stirred by the words of the great preacher and pastor of the Riverside church in New York, Harry Emerson Fosdick. These are the words of Fosdick that transformed Sheppard after his experience of life in the First World War treches to the most prominent British peace campaigner of the twentieth century: "I renounce war. I renounce war because of what it does to our own men.... I renounce war because of what it compels us to do to our enemies.... I renounce war for its consequences, for the lies it lives on and propagates, for the undying hatreds it arouses, for the dictatorships it puts in place of democracy, for the starvation that stalks after it. I renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will I sanction or support another." Sheppard sought to unite the whole country behind that last sentence: "I renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will I sanction or support another." He spent what

proved to be his last five years sweating blood in an effort to inspire the nation to follow him. His greatest moment was when he took up the challenge of running for the Rectorship of Glasgow University—a contest in which one of the three other candidates was Winston Churchill. The arch pacifist took on the arch militarist and romped home by 538 votes to 281. Seeing Sheppard’s rhetorical power, the Dean of St Paul’s Walter Matthews said that Sheppard was the “stuff of which Führers and dictators are made”—and yet a servant of Christ. Yet a week later he was dead at 57 of a heart attack.

His lesson is this: working for peace is harder than working for war. Sheppard faced indifference, ridicule, and hostility. But what gave his efforts credibility was not only that he’d been in the trenches of World War One himself; it was that at St Martin’s, he had shaped and fostered a community in the paths that lead to peace. Whatever we do here at St Martin’s, in Tuesday-lunchtime, concert-ushering, or Sunday-afternoon curry-sharing, in Sunday-evening stewarding or Saturday-night café-staffing, in Tuesday night sustainability-group-participating or Monday-morning fire-alarm-testing, because we believe that together we are walking the paths that lead to peace—peace of mind and heart and soul, peace for the world and the whole creation, peace for the poor and the rich, peace for friend and for stranger, peace for the disabled and the physically free, peace for the believer and the non-believer. It’s a rare institution that can make peace look more interesting than war, but that’s what we’re about here together.

That’s why I’ve stressed the internal workings and practices of our organisation, because that’s the hidden detail of peace that makes it strong enough to withstand war. Later in our service we’ll hear the spiritual “Down by the Riverside.” Its refrain concludes with the words “I ain’t going to study war no more.” So much of the world is studying for war right now, in Yemen, in Congo, in Syria and Iraq. We feel powerless, but we’re not. St Martin and Dick Sheppard showed us what we must do. We must create and join and foster communities of sustainable support and trust and vision and hope like St Martin-in-the-Fields, communities that inspire others and include all and make visible what God has done in Jesus. And so when people ask why you come to St Martin’s, why you serve at St Martin’s, why you work at St Martin’s, we have a simple answer for them: “I want to work for peace. I ain’t going to study war no more.”