

Commentary to the 3rd Sunday of Advent (C)



The Peace that Surpasses All Understanding

The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

That is the conclusion of our second reading for today, from Philippians 4. When Paul wrote this fledgling Christian community, it was facing persecution. “What will tomorrow bring?” they asked. They were anxious. Anxiety is the fear of the unknown. Paul tells them that their future is not a mystery, not unknown. Whatever happens, God will care for them. They needed to remember that God is in control. The Lord is near. They needed to pray to Him, and then trust in Him. Then, instead of anxiety, they will have peace, a peace that surpasses all understanding.

On this Gaudete or Rejoice Sunday, we reflect on the Peace of the Lord. Jesus said in John 14:27: “Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” The peace of the Lord is quite different than the mere cessation of hostility between warring countries....or relatives. The peace of the Lord refers to union with God.

Think about it. We have peace when we are united to God, and turmoil when we are at odds with our Creator. We lose our peace when we allow sin into our lives. Sin itself is the opposite of God; it is chaos. But when we throw sin out, usually

through a good confession and a determination to live for the Lord, we feel this overwhelming comfort, this warmth, this presence of God, this peace. Difficult situations will still crop up in our lives. Hard choices will still have to be made, but united to God, we can make these choices in peace.

The martyrs in dungeons waiting to be tortured and/or killed, waiting to die, waited in peace. And St. Maximilian Kolbe, the saint of Auschwitz, who asked that he be killed instead of Franciszek Gajownachek, a young father whom the Nazis had picked for execution, sat in peace in the starvation cell united to God, waiting to die. St. Margaret Ward also showed the courage of her conviction and the peace that union with Christ brings regardless of what was happening around her or to her. You probably never heard of her. I think it is important that we be aware of the heroic women of our Church as well as the heroic men. Margaret Ward was an English Catholic during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. St. Margaret refused to tell the whereabouts of a priest she helped escape from prison. She was arrested and tortured. Then her captors pretended to be merciful and told her that this all would all end if she renounced her faith. With all these horrible things happening to her, she still remained at peace until they finally killed her. Her persecutors simply could not take the peace of Christ from her. And they tried with the viscousness of the devils they were.

Nor can anyone, or anything take the peace of Christ from us. I have met, and perhaps you have met, dying people who knew their physical lives were coming to an end but also remained peaceful because they looked forward to full union with the Lord. I have met people who are overwhelmed with grief at the loss of a loved one, particularly a child, but who still clung to the Peace of Christ in the core of their being. About thirteen years ago, one of the greatest American bishops of the last century, Cardinal Joseph Bernardine of Chicago, wrote a little book telling about a false accusation made against him and about his dealing with terminal cancer. He entitled the book, *The Gift of Peace*. Get it, and read it. Nothing, no one, can take the Peace of Christ from us. But we can surrender it. We can trade it for the turmoil that is sin. We can give up our union with God so we can hate another person, or group of people. Or we can take a step away from God into the oblivion that the world says is normal behavior for a person our age, no matter what our age may be. For example, some people will celebrate Christmas, the birth of the Prince of Peace, by getting drunk and giving up their union with God, giving up their peace. They give up their core for the sake of that which is on the fringe of their lives. And for them, Christmas, the celebration of the Prince of Peace, turns into turmoil, a celebration of the prince of the world, the devil.

That phrase, “The peace of God that surpasses all understanding,” reminds us that no one can understand what union to God is other than those who are united to Him. It is beyond the understanding of the world. I am sure you are aware that a few years ago a young Greek Orthodox priest stationed here in Tarpon Springs was assaulted in Tampa. He didn’t understand English well, and had asked for directions. The man he asked beat him with a tire iron. The priest forgave his attacker. Many could not understand how he could forgive the person who attacked him. Those who are united to God understood. The one united to God would say, “My assailant hurt my body, I am not going to let him destroy my soul.”

We have all been assaulted at various times in our lives. It is normal to be under attack. We live in a world that rejects God. Of course we will be attacked. Evil always attacks good. Those who do not have the courage to choose God are always going to attack those who do choose Him. It is diabolical jealousy, jealousy of another person’s determination to live a spiritual life. Even if others don’t mean to attack a particular person, their choice of evil will result in good people suffering. Ask any victim of an accident caused by a drunk driver. The driver didn’t mean to hurt or kill someone, but he did mean to lose his rationality and then drive. Ask any family living in turmoil due to the infidelity of one of the parents. The person did not want to hurt his or her children, but he did choose to be immoral. When we suffer in ways similar to these, we need to remind ourselves that we cannot allow anyone or any situation in life to destroy our union with God. Jesus spoke about this when He said in Matthew 10: 28 “Do not be afraid of him who can destroy the body but not destroy the soul.”

Perhaps this might all seem like a weighty presentation for Rejoice Sunday. But our union with Jesus Christ is the source of our joy. We would not have this union had He not come among us as one of us, our celebration of Christmas. We would not have His Peace if He did not accept the results of our turmoil on the cross and then conquer death giving us His Life, our celebration of Easter.

We have the greatest of all gifts. We possess Jesus Christ. Nothing else matters in this life, and nothing else of value will exist in the next life.

We don’t know what the future will bring. But we are not afraid of the unknown. We are not anxious because we have the gift that surpasses the understanding of the world. We have the Lord.

“Peace I give you,” the Lord said. He is the Prince of Peace.

Rejoice!

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