

Pentecost 13
22/8/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 4:1-7, 10-17
Psalm 34
John 6:56-69

Fettered peace

In a sentence

Peace is not freedom from each other but freedom for each other

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...

‘The bond of peace’ is a lovely-sounding phrase and yet one which also becomes a little problematic when we press it for meaning.

There is much which embodies or creates ‘unpeace’ among us. The most obvious right now is the long tail of COVID-19 and the ongoing havoc in our lives and economies. Looming on the horizon is the possibility of a climatic instability which threatens much wider and longer suffering. The news tells us of the return to power in far away places of people whose idea of peace is very different from ours. Colonial arrogance and the impact of war mean that many labour under the continuing impact of colonisation or have their lives limited by the wire or guns which contain refugee camps. These are ‘bonds’ not of peace but which bring anxiety, pain and death. We are bound in these ways by physics and chemistry, by history and politics.

Our sense for what peace might be in relation to all this is perhaps best summarised in the broad notion of ‘freedom’: peace is freedom from what fetters us.

When Paul speaks of peace here, however, it is of ‘the bond of peace’ or – a possible translation – the ‘fetter’ of peace. Being bound or fettered seems a strange way to speak of peace. Paul’s precise meaning here is not clear but what is clear is that ‘freedom’ as we usually conceive doesn’t sit comfortably with the ‘peace’ he implies. For Paul, either we are bound up *for* peace – perhaps restrained so that peace might be realised – or peace itself binds us. In either case, we are not ‘free’ in the way we normally think of freedom.

This is surely offensive to the sensibilities of the modern heart. The struggle for freedom is one of the driving engines of modern western society. What place has a ‘binding’ – even a peaceful one – in the free lives for which we long?

The tension between peace and freedom arises when we imagine that our familiar notion of freedom is itself the fundamental expression of peace. We hold freedom to be good, and peace to be good, and so peace and freedom to be the same thing. Yet it is likely that here we hold two loosely-thought things together as if they were one, but in fact they remain two. And so we can’t work out why all the freedoms we now enjoy – at least in our part of the world and in the social stratum most of us here occupy – why these freedoms have not led to peace.

The problem is that the idea of being absolutely free is finally incoherent, and so also is the notion of peace we associate with it. We are always bound by *something*. Aspiring to absolute freedom is ultimately a rage against that fact that we are embodied. For, if we were able to liberate ourselves from all external constraint we will surely still grow old and die. Death only ceases to be our enemy – ceases to be our limitation – if our mortal bodies don't finally matter. If our freedom were absolute, peace would mean that our bodies and their needs only *seem* to be important, that neither they nor the wider world we see around us are finally real. There is no radical freedom from all things, all persons, all constraints, which does not relegate those things to nothingness.

But Paul does not deny the reality of the world or us within it. The peace he envisages is not an *escape* from all bonds, but being subject to the *right* bonds. The 'fetter of peace' is not a binding in place of freedom, it is one kind of binding in place of other bindings. Paul will come later to our own particular bodies as 'bound' in certain ways within peace. Here, however, the body which is in view is the body politic of the church as a whole – and so by extension what is held out to the wider human family.

The metaphor of a body for a human community is powerful here because no part of a body is free from any other part; everything is bound together – we are 'joined and knit together by every ligament', as Paul puts it. In this way the body grows – and every part within it. In this way, the body and its parts are at peace with each other – *bound* to each other – and yet wholly free to be themselves. It is this binding which *frees* us to be ourselves.

Peace is not isolation but connection. And not connection as mere juxtaposition but *interconnection*: each part bound to the other for its own sake and for the sake of the other: for the sake of peace. Peace, then, is not a freedom of one *from* the other, but a freedom of one *for* the other.

The peace Paul commands will not be realised in separating ourselves from each other – rich from poor, young from old, Jew from Arab, Muslim from Christian, or whatever. Such separation is just cold war, and a cold war is still a war. Peace is the peace we need when justice takes shape among us: when my well-being is dependent upon yours, and yours upon mine. The 'bond of peace' is this fundamental interconnectedness.

And because we are ever living and moving and changing, the peaceful life is one of 'humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love'. Peace does not stand still, there is no resting in peace.

In this way we share in the work of God in Christ, growing into the promised humanity of Jesus himself, whose own gentleness and patience and bearing of us builds us – here and now – into the peace of God.

Let us, then, set each other free by building each other up in love – from, in and for the bond of peace.
