

Reconciliation



Revelation 7:11-17 "Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

This morning's scripture from the Revelation to St. John the Divine resonates more strongly than usual with me in the face of the ongoing crisis in the Middle East. While I am aware that the author of the Book of Revelation was himself simply struggling to make sense of the Jewish revolt of 70 A.D., and the destruction of Jerusalem, and the massacre of thousands upon thousands of Jews by the Romans. That struggle reappears these days as we all watched in horror the reports of the vicious Hamas attacks on October 7th, kidnapping, murder, torture, rape, and worse, visited upon the elderly, upon women, children, and even babies. Our hearts have also been broken upon hearing the desperate pleas of those Israelis whose loved ones are now being held as hostages and bargaining chips and human shields in the tunnels of the Gaza strip. And then there is the plight of some 2 million poor Palestinians who are caught in the middle between Hamas and the IDF, and who cannot escape Gaza, thus they are also hostages to Hamas, and human shields, while they simply struggle for the necessities of life, like water, electricity, food, and medical supplies, a population who cannot find shelter or safety where innocent Palestinian children cry out for help as all around them buildings come tumbling down into the streets as they are bombed again and again and again, as tanks and soldiers roll through their neighborhood, and move from street

to street. All of these are, it seems to me, struggling to survive the great ordeal, while we watch painfully from the sidelines, wishing and praying that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and that they will hunger and thirst no more.

And then in today's Gospel, Jesus says "Blessed on the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." If we really are to be peacemakers, then what are we to do? Well, if we really want to be peacemakers, then we cannot take sides. We need to be able to hear and to understand each party's concerns, and each side's fears. Peacemakers are meant to help bridge the gap between opposing forces, to lead by example, to further reconciliation, to break down the barriers that divide us, to cool temperatures, to foster civil dialogue, and to encourage us all to respect the dignity of every human being.

The Church, I have always imagined, should be that safe place where we trust each other enough to actually listen to each other, to hear different points of view with respect, to comfort one another, to offer shoulders to cry upon, to refuse easy answers and quick solutions, so that there can some kind of real progress toward reconciliation and peace during a time of war.

As our Guidelines for Mutual Dialogue read, "it is okay for us to disagree; that we can love each other as Christians and not

hold the same opinion on everything." Indeed, imagine how boring that would be if we always agreed? However, it is NOT okay for us to dismiss or denigrate viewpoints that are simply different from our own. We must not shame, blame, or criticize self or others, if we are to be agents of reconciliation. We can disagree with ideas, but not with people. So, we need to use "I" statements to express our opinions, our thoughts, and our feelings, and NOT use objective statements as though we are self-righteously declaring the truth for all. And then we need to listen to the other side, to 'try on' different views and perspectives, to hear the opinions, thoughts, and feelings of others, and then strive to use "both/and" language, to hold together the larger truth than any one of us holds alone.

This is our primary role as Christians, I believe, to help bring peace and reconciliation to our world, so as to be called children of God. We are not meant to divide the righteous people from the sinners and tax-collectors, but to bring all the people together around one table, one altar, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all.

Later in this chapter from Matthew, Jesus says "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on

the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous alike. For if you love (only) those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" So, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. What Jesus asks of us is not easy to do. It takes practice. It takes time, but it must be done, not avoided. It is our duty, our vocation, and our responsibility as followers of Jesus to try.

I once heard Diogenes Allen, the contemporary Christian theologian, answer that question of what we should do in times like these in a most thought-provoking way: "How is evil removed?" He asked, ". . . Evil cannot remove evil . . . Violence only leads to more violence. Unless (evil) is absorbed by some people who have sufficient goodness to overcome their natural reaction, (evil) will spread and grow. But a genuinely good person, instead of responding to evil with evil, absorbs it . . . (he said). (Evil thus) causes good people to suffer, but because of their suffering and their refusal to pass it on, evil vanishes somewhat. If there is enough goodness, any evil can be absorbed. If there is inexhaustible goodness, all evil can be absorbed."

The idea of 'absorbing evil' proposes a frightening prospect for most of us, asking us to incorporate the reality of

evil into the fabric of our lives rather than turn away from it, but to face it head on, to weave the very real pain and injustices of an oftentimes malevolent world into our lives. It suggests not ignoring, not denying evil, and/or not indulging our natural reactions of retaliation and vengeance, but confronting the horrible reality of abuse and injustice and misery in the world around us, and then suffering through it. Absorbing evil involves a very real personal experience of the Crucifixion.

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 'Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.'"

So, what should we do when faced with violence or evil that really harms or hurts us, or our children, our friends, or our way of life? The idea of absorbing evil in that larger way, the idea of willingly suffering great tragedy, a great ordeal, a horrifying injustice or abuse and doing nothing retaliatory is a very frightening thought. When it comes right down to it, I am afraid that many of us would seek some way out, we would find an justification for vengeance, and let someone else absorb the evil.

There is real evil and violence here in our world, all around us. Perhaps if we can begin with the absorbing of the lesser evils and malicious insults of others, and with the curbing of our natural reactions of defensiveness and retaliation, and changing in some small ways the very habit of our being, then we perhaps can begin to make a real difference in the world, and bring us all closer to real peace and reconciliation as children of the same God. AMEN