

Date: January 1, 2005

NEW YEAR'S MASS FOR PEACE

SERMON: Cultivating Peace

Text(s): Isaiah 32:15-18; James 3:13-18;
Matthew 5:1-12

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Well, the very fact that we're here this morning means that we survived another year. Not only that, we've survived another round of Christmas feasting, which is, perhaps, even more remarkable, so let me wish all of you survivors a very Happy New Year.

One of the better New Year's stories I've heard is a story about two of the 20th century's most celebrated British playwrights, Frederick Lonsdale and Seymour Hicks who were deep in conversation at a New Year's Eve party at London's Garrick Club. Hicks was urging Lonsdale to make peace with a fellow member of the club with whom Lonsdale had formerly been a close friend. After a falling out several years earlier, the two had not spoken since. "You must make your peace with him," Hicks said to Lonsdale. "It is very unkind to be unfriendly at such a time. Go over now and wish him a happy New Year."

So Lonsdale crossed the room and spoke to his former friend, now his enemy. "I wish you a happy New Year," he said, "but only one."

I expect every one of us can identify with Lonsdale's sentiments. I doubt if there are any of us here who haven't felt such hostility toward someone at some point in our lives. We know how hard it is, sometimes, to let go of anger or resentment and reach out to make peace with someone who has offended us or from whom we have become estranged. Just as making peace on this personal level is always something that involves both individuals who are estranged, so it is in the larger context of societies or nations. Which is why, of course, that as we survey the global landscape on this first day of 2005, one of the most glaring facts that confronts our eyes, is that there is precious little peace on earth. We

are mired ever more deeply in an increasingly bloody and violent conflict in Iraq that no one knows how to get out of. Israelis and Palestinians continue to shed one another's blood as they have for generations. Northern Sudanese repress their southern compatriots with a cruel genocide in Darfur. Congo's civil war manages to eliminate 1000 people per day. Maoist guerillas have turned the once peaceful kingdom of Nepal into a state ridden with terrorist atrocities. Russians and Chechnyans continue their murderous political struggle. Colombia has all but disintegrated in a civil war, largely fueled and motivated by the lucrative cocaine trade. The United Nations has become for many, a joke.

Not only on the geopolitical scale, but on the homefront, too, peace is a scarce commodity. Red State vs. Blue State, family values vs. free expression, conservative vs. liberal, communitarians vs. libertarians, black vs. white, and everybody against the immigrants.

I won't even go on to discuss the scene on the more intimate level of families and interpersonal relationships. We already know the absence of peace in those arenas all too painfully. Peace, harmony, just relationships, when they do occur here and there, are newsworthy because they're so uncommon.

So what kind of message are we sending when we wish one another a happy new year? Are we just being conventional, doing what's customary, mouthing empty words?

Our lessons this morning all remind us, both of the blessings and the high cost of peace. The prophet Isaiah holds before us God's goal for humanity: it is a vision of all the world at peace. In the desert will bloom an orchard; fruitfulness and fecundity will replace barrenness and sterility. But, that vision will not happen by itself. "*Justice will bring about peace,*" he says, "*Doing the right things will produce calm and security.*" Like the old bumper sticker that many of us have seen puts it, "If you want peace, work for justice." And we all know what hard work justice is, don't we? Justice doesn't happen by

itself either. Doing the right thing is almost never the easy thing. And yet, if we want the desert to bloom, if we want the dry and barren wastes of human relationships to produce the sweet fruits of peace, there's a lot of digging and moving of rocks and fertilizing and watering to be done.

Knowing how hard that work is might cause us to despair or become cynical, knowing ourselves and others the way we do. Yet, Isaiah also reminds us that this hard work of doing justice, of doing the right thing, is a response to a gift that we have already been freely given. "*The spirit from on high will be poured out on us,*" he says. God graciously gives us the spirit, the power, the motivation, the dynamism we need to know the right and to do justice. We do the work of justice, but it is always God's spirit at work within us that moves our wills and strengthens our hands and puts the words in our mouths to do the things that make for peace.

"*The fruit of righteousness,*" says St. James in our epistle lesson, "*is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.*" Isn't that a wonderful image? For all of you who love to garden, that conjures up a wonderful vision, doesn't it? I think that perhaps one of the reasons why Mainers are such devoted gardeners is that winter lasts so long, we long for the blooming and blossoming during the short spring and summer. When we first moved here, about a year and a half ago, my wife was attending a tea at someone's home one afternoon. One of the women at the tea asked her if she was a gardener. My wife replied that she was not; having lived in the center of Paris for the past decade, there wasn't much gardening to be done. The other woman listened to this explanation, and then said to her, "Well, when you become a gardener. . ." It was our first clue about some of the things that are important to Mainers.

I grew up in the country and have been digging in the dirt and planting things most of my life, so this image resonates with me. I love to

plant seeds and watch them sprout. I love to pick that first ripe tomato, or to gather fresh raspberries from the vine for my breakfast. My wife Carol would probably tell you that while I love to sow and reap, I hate to pull weeds and always try to stick her with that job. I might as well confess that up front; otherwise she'll tell everyone she talks to afterward.

But when it's peace we're cultivating, we know that in between the planting of seeds and harvesting of the fruit, there's a lot of weeding and pruning to be done, isn't there? In fact, most of the season is devoted to the pulling of weeds and pruning dead branches and fertilizing, and keeping the soil loose. Planting is easy; cultivating is hard, and it's not always easy to make the connection between hoeing those weeds and the taste of those first radishes or that first tomato. And sometimes it's only our anticipation, by faith, of that first fruit that keeps us going in the hot sun, bending over, pulling the weeds, picking off the Japanese beetles and tomato worms, and staking up the plants.

And yet, who's going to do it if we don't? Do you trust governments to make peace? I don't. And I don't care which administration or political party you happen to be talking about. It may be the function of government to preserve peace, but my experience and my study of history tells me that governments only make peace when forced to it by the people who demand it. War is ultimately more fun and more profitable. Nations and politicians thrive on conflict. Peace is only a top agenda item for legislatures and administrations when war has exhausted our resources or sapped our energies to the point where we're willing to stop. General Robert E. Lee spoke truly for many people, I think, when he said, "It is a good thing that war is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of it."

Which is probably why it always seems to be the young people who go off to fight the wars. The older people have already fought their wars and discovered that the thrill of combat is a

terrible thrill that is always profoundly destructive and dehumanizing. As Dorothy Sayers, the 20th century novelist reminded us, “War is a judgment on nations that have refused to live by the moral law.” Even the well-documented profitability of war ultimately costs those engaged in it far more than they gain. Individuals and nations lose their souls. Justice is always the first casualty. And without justice, of course, there cannot be peace.

The simple fact is, we shall have peace when we want it badly enough to spend our time cultivating it. We already have the gift of the spirit to equip us for the work; the work itself is left to us— the work of justice and doing what is right.

To cultivate peace, we must first of all make sure that we are living justly ourselves, to the extent that it is within our powers to do so. While all of us, to some extent, are caught up in unjust systems of exploitation that are beyond our ability to control, most of us can make significant changes in our habits of consumption; no one *needs* to drive a Humvee. We can become socially and politically engaged so that our voices and our actions are heard in the public arena, advocating for just laws and just policies. And a good deal of cultivating peace is simply the effort to become informed about the larger implications of our actions and their impact on others. All of us can acquaint ourselves with those within our own community who are exploited or in need of advocates. When we know the needs of others, it’s more difficult to ignore them and act selfishly.

In addition to paying attention to the ways in which our own lives contribute to the lack of justice, and therefore to the lack of peace in the world, we also need to hold our leaders accountable for leading us in the paths of justice and peace. Neither apathy nor sheep-like acquiescence to appeals to our patriotism should prevent us from demanding that our lawmakers and political leaders exercise their responsibilities

in ways that promote just relationships within our own nation and between our nation and others.

Last January His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, gave an address before a gathering of the international diplomatic corps, addressing their task of being peacemakers. After stating that the independence of nations can only be realized when those nations recognize their interdependence on one another, he said,

It will always be possible for a leader who acts in accordance with his convictions to reject situations of injustice or of institutional corruption, or to put an end to them. It is precisely in this, I believe, that we rediscover what is today commonly called “good governance.” The material and spiritual well-being of humanity, the protection of the freedom and rights of the human person, selfless public service, closeness to concrete conditions: all of these take precedence over every political project and constitute a moral necessity which in itself is the best guarantee of peace within nations and peace between States.

As we who are followers of the faith of Christ gather on this New Year’s Day around this Table, we gather to remember the One of whom the Epistle to the Ephesians reminds us,

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (Eph. 2:14) We recall also his own words, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” May that become this new year’s resolution for all of us.

(Cf. www.catholicjustwar.org/popediplomaticcorps.asp for the full text of Pope John Paul II’s address.)