

Peace on Earth

In the name of the Child born to us – our Prince of Peace; dear friends in Christ: It was 1969, in the spring before the now famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) so called “summer of love”; and former President Dwight D. Eisenhower passed away. He had been a genuine American hero, best known for serving as the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe during WWII. And I suppose it was because of his important role in bringing peace to a then very troubled world, but I recall spending nearly a week preparing for a special assembly at the grade school I attended then – some sort of patriotic memorial gathering for our fallen former leader. Over and over again they had us practice a Latin choral we were to sing at the event called *Dona Nobis Pacem*. Is anyone familiar with it? It’s simply the prayer: “Give us peace.” I don’t recall that they explained that to us at the time, though. They seemed more concerned that we pronounce the words properly. It was that tediously repetitive piece and another song that went “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me; let there be peace on earth: the peace that was meant to be.” This is what they had us sing. And these are noble sentiments, to be sure.

Especially concerning what was going on at the time. Ike did his part to help win the *second* war to end all wars that we fought in the last century. But when he died, our nation was embroiled in yet another war; this one in south east Asia – and it was the second one in that corner of the globe in as many decades in a country that most Americans couldn’t find on a map. That war was, in turn, one of the many proxy wars we got involved in during the four long decades of the Cold War. And like many of these smaller scale conflicts, it wasn’t popular with a large portion of our population. Our soldiers went there to serve as peacekeepers. They fought, they bled, and many of them died to defend the rights and security of others. But when the survivors came home they were met by fellow citizens protesting the war who insulted them, spat on them, and often did violence to them – all in the name of peace. And I don’t know which is more ironic: that protesters for peace thought they were justified in attacking those who sacrificed so much, or that they directed their ire against soldiers – the one group of people who hope for peace more than anyone else. After all, they’re the ones who get shot at when there’s a war on. Soldiers don’t cause wars. They only suffer because of them.

But still, whether we sing about how much we want peace, or we protest against wars, or we fight to end them, lasting peace always eludes us. In the transition from the decade of the eighties to the nineties, the Cold War suddenly came to an end. The Soviet Union that President Reagan had called “the Evil Empire” dissolved into chaos. It looked like we might finally have a chance for peace. But no, looming on the horizon were other threats – most notably from large numbers of Muslim zealots who are committed to doing violence, who gleefully celebrate suicide bombings, mass murder of innocents, and cutting the heads off of hostage western newsmen and aid workers; and who, oddly, don’t find it ironic at all to hold signs that say things like “Death to those who deny that Islam is a religion of peace”.

But we don’t have to go outside of our own borders to find conflicts. In recent weeks throughout our nation we’ve seen allegedly peaceful protesters throwing bottles and rocks at heavily armed peace officers and then, when the police attempt to disperse them with tear gas, they turn to burning, looting, and bloody rioting. Such incidents reveal that past efforts to end discrimination and establish racial reconciliation were only cosmetic at best, and that always simmering under the surface are mutual suspicion and hostility.

But we don't have to go to Ferguson or New York City or Los Angeles to find it. We've got conflict in our own communities. We've got it in our own families. We've got domestic violence, abuse, divorce; we've got neighbors we can't get along with; we've got people we don't trust and who don't trust us. We've got wars both hot and cold right here in our own homes.

Two thousand years ago the angels that proclaimed the birth of our Savior sang of God's promise of peace on earth. I'm sure they sang about it far more beautifully and sincerely than did many grade school choirs back in 1969. But the question is: "Where is it?" They promised peace, peace from God, which implies the end to war. We all want it. We long for it eagerly; but in the past 2000 years we've had nothing but wars and rumors of war. So, was it a lie? Did the angels deceive the shepherds – and all the rest of us – with their promise of peace on earth? Many people believe so. But if not, if they were telling the truth, where is the peace they proclaimed?

It turns out that they answered that question before they made the promise. They told the shepherds, "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." That baby, they told the shepherds, is the Savior, Christ the Lord. And he is our peace from God on earth. He is our peace in the terrible war that has raged throughout human history; not the petty squabbles between nations and races, but all of mankind's violent, insane, and utterly futile rebellion against God. It's the biggest and most costly war of all. You know, we usually rate wars based on the numbers of the casualties they produce. A war that ends with 50 million dead we say is bigger and more serious than one with only 5 million dead. But the war of which I speak has killed or will kill every human who's ever lived. Most people act as if they don't even know it's going on. But it is, and we are all part of it.

And do you want to know what's really ironic? We sit at home and watch on the news as protesters defy the legal authorities, become violent, and then loot and burn down their own neighborhoods, pretty much destroying their own lives and livelihoods; and we think, "How stupid can they be?" We judge them; but what we don't see is that's us. That's exactly what we are doing in our war against God. Every sin we commit is a defiance of his rightful authority. Every violation deserves his swift punishment; but we act as if he is the one who is unjust. How dare God presume to tell me how to live! Just who does he think he is? And we proceed to pursue our selfish ambitions by which we destroy others and ourselves. It's the war that causes all other wars and conflicts. It's a war that is entirely our fault. And it's a war that we cannot win. Everyone who insists on continuing to wage this war will end up dead not just in time, but in eternity in the second death we call hell.

But God's desire is for peace. His desire for peace is so great that he actually places it upon the earth: his peace, the peace between God and man in the child who is both God and man. His peace to us in this divine child wrapped in strips of cloth and lifted up on a manger of wood above the filth of a stable floor. His peace in this child grown to manhood lifted up on a cross of wood bearing the filth of our sins and suffering violent abuse at the hands of those he came to save. His peace in this body wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in a tomb after having died to pay the penalty of our sins. His peace in this body raised to life again, showing the marks of his suffering to secure our peace with God in the wounds in his hands and side. His peace in this same body of flesh and blood offered to you under the forms of bread and wine.

Where is the peace on earth the angels promised? The shepherds found him in a Bethlehem stable. And today we find him where he promises to be in his Word and Sacraments. That's why, upon consecrating the elements in Holy Communion, the pastor

raises them for you to see and intones, “The peace of the Lord be with you always.” At that point, he’s holding God’s peace on earth in his hands: the Word made flesh and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. It’s the only true and lasting peace on earth that we can possibly know. And from it flows our peace and reconciliation with each other. If there is to be peace on earth, it can’t, as the song goes, begin with me. It begins and ends with God’s gift to us of his Son.

Therefore may we pray to the Lord, now and always, “Dona nobis pacem – Give us *this* peace”. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!