

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Eastertide

John 14:23-29; Psalm 67; Acts 16:9-15; Rev. 21:10, 21:22—22:5

**John 14:23-29** contains the well-known statement of Jesus, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (vs. 27). This statement is said within the context of Jesus’ promise of “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit” as his replacement once he is (shortly) taken away from them. When he is gone, Jesus is saying, what will remain with his followers will be his gift of peace to them, and that peace will both free them from fear and will provide for them the Holy Spirit who will empower and enable them to be “Christ-ones” to the world.

This great statement on peace is one of five times Jesus uses the word “peace” in the Gospel of John. The others are John 16:33, and 20:19, 21, 26. John 16:33 is used in a context similar to our gospel lesson for today, when he warns them of his departure from them but reminds them they will continue with Jesus’ peace, even in his absence. The three references in John are at Jesus’ resurrection when he appears to the disciples and blesses them with the words, “Peace be with you”.

But what does Jesus mean by “peace”? With what is he blessing his disciples? What is he promising his disciples will keep with them once he has been “taken away” from them?

To first century Jews (and that would include Jesus and his disciples), the word “peace” (in Hebrew, *shalom*; in the language Jesus usually spoke - Aramaic, *shelam*; in Greek, *eirene*) did not simply mean the cessation of hostilities. It is intriguing to note the number of English words into which *shalom* and *eirene* are translated, as translators seek to capture the unique nuance of the Hebrew or Greek word as it is used in specific contexts. *Shalom* is translated in the Old Testament with the English words *weal*, *welfare*, *completeness*, *to cause to be at peace*, *to make peace*, *peace-offering*, *at rest*, *at ease*, *secure*, *safe*, *to finish well*, *to prosper*, *to be whole*, *to be perfect*, *to be victorious* as well as *peace*. Likewise, the Greek word *eirene* is translated in the New Testament as *unity*, *concord*, *to desire peace* as well as *peace*.

What this comparison reveals to us is that *shalom* and *eirene* do not simply mean what the English word *peace* means. The English word is essentially a negative word – that is, the word *peace* is expressing the absence of something – war, conflict, violence or confrontation. Therefore *peace* exists in conflict’s place. But the Hebrew word *shalom* goes far beyond that.

*Shalom* can be used simply as a greeting or a wish to a friend or loved one (“*Shalom* to you, my friend”). But at its fullest, *shalom* captures the Hebrew vision of human society, the non-human world, and even the environment in an integrated and relational whole where “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Isaiah 65:25). *Shalom* is the theology of hope of Israel and of the early church, its vision of what the world some day will be.

Thus, when Jesus used the word *shalom* (e.g., Luke 10:1-9 as well as today’s Gospel lesson), it is clear that he was describing the embrace of the world as God intended it to be – a Godly society of justice (Micah 6:8; Col. 1:15-20), equitable distribution of wealth and consequent elimination of poverty (Duet. 6:10-12; 15:4-11; Acts 4:32-35), and of intimate and committed relationship

with God and each other (Num. 6:22-26; Phil. 3:10). It is that vision and the carrying out of that vision that can be transmitted to people by Jesus and by Jesus' followers. It is the "kingdom of God". And that is what Jesus is promising to the disciples after his departure – that Jesus' vision of the world as God intended it to be and the power to translate that vision into action will not depart from the church! Rather, as "shalom-makers", we will have the immense power of Jesus at our disposal to use to bring about the transformation of humanity into the world as God created it to be!

**Psalm 67** is well known, and deals with the necessity for all the nations of the world to be centered in Yahweh.

"May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him" (67:1-7).

Here is a relational culture promulgated for the whole earth. Every nation and all peoples of the world are being called into relationship with God. If that happens, humanity will be centered in the praise of God, justice (equity) will move through the warp-and-woof of all society, and all will live in abundance with all economic needs met ("the earth has yielded its increase"). Thus, what the world will truly experience is "shalom" – for that shalom will be centered in God. The psalmist calls upon God to make this happen. But it will only happen as humanity chooses to make it happen!

**Acts 16:9-15** is an intriguing story, in that the author of Acts (Luke) has obviously constructed the story to stand as Paul's parallel to Peter's conversion of Cornelius, the Roman centurion (Acts 10:1-33). In the Cornelius story, Peter shares the gospel with Cornelius because of the clear supernatural intervention of God instructing him to do so. Likewise, in today's scripture lesson, Paul has a God-given vision of a man of Macedonia calling to him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:9b). Thus, as in the Peter story, it was not that Paul decided to begin mission work in Europe because of his development of a calculated mission strategy or even because of the persuasion of scripture. It is that God appeared to him in the guise of a Macedonian, calling him to this new mission advance. And, like Peter, he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision!

Paul and his mission team sail across the Mediterranean Sea to Philippi, the closest city in Europe and a leading Roman colony. There, the text tells us, "On the Sabbath day we were outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer" (vs. 13). The Jewish Law stipulated that when there was a minimum of ten Jewish men, a synagogue should be formed. Failing to reach that number, then "a place of prayer" could be established outdoors (a synagogue being a building as well as a congregation) where the Law could be taught and

prayers could be offered to God. That “place of prayer” was normally to be beside a moving body of water, such as a river.

What Luke is therefore telling us is that Paul and his team, knowing there was an insufficient number of Jews to establish a synagogue, went on the Sabbath day to that location in Philippi where Jewish men would be gathered with their families to study the Law. Instead, what they found was a group of women, brought together by “a certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, (who) was from the city of Thyatira and (was) a dealer in purple cloth” (vs. 14). These few words tell us an immense amount about Lydia, however. First, she is “a worshiper of God”; that is a term used for Gentiles who were intrigued by the Jewish belief in God and responsive to that God, but who were not themselves Jews. It is the same identical term used for Cornelius, Peter’s Gentile convert (Acts 10:22)! Since Lydia was not a Jew, it was likely that the other women were not Jews, as well. That meant, therefore, that Gentile women were gathering at a “place of prayer” to worship and learn about Yahweh, rather than Jewish men doing so!

Second, Luke tells us that Lydia was “a dealer in purple cloth”. That meant that she was a businesswoman – that is, a woman independently operating her own business. This meant she was likely unmarried. It also meant that she was likely quite wealthy and an influence in the economic world of Philippi; that is so because purple cloth was a luxury item. The dye for purple cloth was extracted from murex shellfish, requiring many shellfish to produce sufficient dye to color a garment. Thus, only royalty and the very wealthy could afford such cloth. Lydia was therefore a businesswoman who dealt with the elite.

Lydia invites Paul and his mission team to stay at her house while they are in Philippi. This is marvelous hospitality. But it also indicates that Lydia had embraced the faith in Jesus shared by Paul. “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul”, Luke tells us (vs. 14b). She was converted to Christ, was baptized and became a Christian believer.

Given her status in the economic community, her support of Christianity would legitimate both Paul and his mission. In fact, it would bring as much credibility to Christianity in the Gentile business world as Cornelius’ embrace of the faith would bring in the Roman political and military world.

Thus, both Peter’s conversion of the politically/militarily powerful Gentile Cornelius and Paul’s conversion of the economically powerful Gentile Lydia are meant by Luke to parallel one another, in order to indicate how much the gospel was now moving into all aspects of the Gentile world, not just in the conversion of individuals but in impacting their political, economic and social realities, as well.

**Revelation 21:10, 21:22--22:5** is a description of a city without any churches! It deals with the question, “What does human society look like when evil is destroyed and systems no longer work to dominate, oppress and exploit? What does humanity look like when we live in a city of shalom? What does the world look like when its political, economic and religious forces are all centered upon God and God’s Son, Jesus Christ?” That is what Revelation 21 and 22 are all about.

The text begins, “And in the spirit (the angel) carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (21:10). And what is that city of God that the writer of Revelation sees?

First, the city is immense beyond any imagination. Revelation 21:9-17 includes elaborate measurements of the New Jerusalem – and those measurements are extraordinary.

The city is a square: 12,000 stadia (v. 16) – or 1,400 miles to a side. That is an absolutely immense city that dwarfs even the largest cities of today. To give us a sense of the immensity of the New Jerusalem, if that city were placed down upon the globe today, it would stretch from London to New York or from Sao Paulo Brazil to LaPaz Bolivia or from Nairobi Kenya to Kinshasa Zaire or from Bangkok to Tapei. Who can imagine a city of that size?

Surprisingly, the walls are low in comparison to the size of the city. Its walls are only 144 cubits high (v. 17); that is about 200 feet. That sounds high to modern ears, but not to the ancient peoples. The walls of Babylon were 300 feet high and the walls around the temple in Jerusalem were 180 feet high. Given either the size of the walls of ancient cities or the relationship of wall-height to size of city, the walls of the New Jerusalem are quite modest.

Why would such a gargantuan city have such low walls? Could it be to suggest that God built the city this huge so that there is room for absolutely everybody? And could the low walls be a way of suggesting that God has no need to keep people out of his city or to defend it? Are the city and its walls, therefore, a visual symbol of the inclusivity and peace of the kingdom of God?

Second, the city is wealthy beyond imagination. The walls and city gates are described as gem-laden (Rev. 21:18-21) and the city’s streets are paved with gold. What was precious in the former world is now so plentiful that it is used as common building material. Thus the city is described as a society in which all its people will live in plenty and security. In God’s city, there are no slums, no squatter settlements, no *favellas* or *barrios* or *bustees*! There are neither governmental policies to try to keep people out nor any economic standards which exclude the marginalized from effective participation in the marketplace. Rather, all poverty will be gone, as well as all the exploitation and oppression that inevitably is generated by the maintenance of an unbalanced economy that favors the rich.

Third, “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb” (21:22). There are no churches in the city whose creator and sustainer is God. Why not? Does God not want to be worshiped? Of course he does, but the Lord does not need churches to provide that function! The church is a foreshadowing of the kingdom of God. But it is not to be taken for the kingdom itself! It was created to be transitional and temporary, the means by which God remains present in the city of humankind. It exists between the resurrection of Christ and Christ’s return in glory. The church is unnecessary in the New Jerusalem where God can be directly present to God’s people.

“(The city’s) temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb”. The center of the life of this city is God, and the center of the people’s focus on God is worship. And no intermediary is

needed to bring the people to God or God to the people. The life of this city – its economics, its political order, its housing, its religion – is centered in God, for this is the city of God!

It is obvious that the description of the city of God contained in Revelation 21 is dealing, once again, with the political, economic and religious systems of the city. What makes this city different is that it is centered in God.

“The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it” (vv. 23-24).

The existence of the New Jerusalem will not mean that there are no other nations. There will be other countries and they will be governed politically. But all the nations will operate by the light of God, and rulers will govern under the authority of God. Jerusalem will be the center of all international affairs, and all governments of the world will live in peace and under the authority of God.

“Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there” (v. 25). City gates in ancient times were shut for only one reason – protection from armies, thieves or marauding gangs. For a city never to shut its gates would indicate only one thing to the ancient mind: there is nothing to fear because all crime is gone, justice for all prevails, and economic security is so accorded to all the people that none need fear robbery from anyone else.

Even the natural order will be under subjection, for “there will be no night there”. Rather than tyrannizing humanity with its sickness and death-delivering power, or rather than having to be held at bay through medication, surgery or therapy, the natural order will only benefit and enhance the life of the people in the city. For “death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things have passed away” (21:4).

Finally, Revelation 22:1-5 presents the vision of the city as becoming the abode of the Garden of Eden. The river of the water of life and the tree of life (22:1-2) are transposed from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:10-14, Gen. 2:9; 3:22-24) to the New Jerusalem to take their place in the center of the city. That tree bears annually twelve crops of fruit, symbols for abundance and plenty. The author is sharing his vision of a rich abundance showered upon each resident of the city. The economy will benefit everyone and not simply a few.

The people of the city “will see (God’s) face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (22:4). Everyone will be in the most direct and intimate and continuing relationship with God possible. Direct relationship with God will not only mean a perfect worship of God. It will also mean that our work and activity in the city will be consecrated to God as each person works for the common good.

Finally, the political order, serving under God, will be both completely just and democratic. The vision of the river ends with an intriguing statement: “and they will reign forever and ever” (22:5). One would expect the text to say that God would reign forever. Instead, it states that the people of this vast city – millions upon millions of people – will reign. In perfect submission to

Christ, the people of that city will govern together as an integral part of a political system that is both democratic and just.

What the author of John intends to present is his description of how human society becomes fully and totally a shalom society. The world will reach its apex in shalom! The New Jerusalem will be a city fully under God, a religious environment where all will be in relationship with God and thus in shalom with each other (Rev. 21:3, 6-8, 22; 22:3-4). God's city will also be one practicing an economics of plenty, equitable distribution of wealth, the elimination of poverty and security for all (Rev. 21:13-14, 18-21, 26-27; 22:1-2). This will include a transformation of the natural order so that death, illness, grief and pain will be gone (Rev. 21:4, 25). Finally, the city will have a political order which is centered in God with room for everyone, a city whose political life will be completely just and in which everyone will play a part in the city's governance (Rev. 21:24-25; 22:5). This will include a centralization of all international affairs in God's city as all governments of the world live in peace and under the authority of God (Rev. 21:24-25). This is the world as God intends it to be. This is the biblical concept of shalom, fully lived out in human society.

The vision of the New Jerusalem was given to the church in order to encourage us in our day-to-day ministries as Christians. We continue to live and work in an unjust and uncaring world, sometimes wondering if the work we are doing is having any effect upon our nation, our city, our neighborhood or even our church. For all our effort, our presence, our prayers, our words of proclamation, our deeds of mercy and justice, and our work for the liberation of the victims and the seduced of our city's systems seem to bear little fruit. And we cannot help but wonder whether it is worth it all.

The book of Revelation proclaims to us that what we do is worth it! We are among the faithful company of God's people who are waging war against the powers of darkness in our world – and we will win. God is at work in our city through us. Christ will continue to work through his people until that day when God will create that new city where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, and the city will become the Holy City of our God. We can go about what often seems like thankless and difficult and exhausting work, knowing that the kingdom of God for which we work and upon which we focus our prayers really will arrive in all its glory someday. And it is closer now than ever before, precisely because we have been faithful in doing the work God has chosen and called us to do.

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20)!

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