

3 Advent, December 17, 2006
“O Day of Peace” –Susan M. Flanders
Phil. 4:4-9, Luke 3:7-18

“Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” This lovely verse from Ps. 85 is one of my favorites in the whole Psalter. It sounds so good, so desirable. I take it as a theme for this third Sunday in Advent – a vision of how our world might be – even as we daily confront a world so far from this vision.

How do we hold onto the vision and live realistically? Both are important, yet so often vision and reality seem almost hopelessly at odds!

These days we are engulfed in a great torrent of words about what to do about Iraq, the almost four year old war that has so divided us, saddened us and tarnished our image in the world, and, far more seriously, brought death or maiming or trauma or disruption of life to hundreds of thousands on all sides. This war is insidious in the way it has invaded our lives, even without a draft or much real sacrifice here, except on the part of those who fight it for us. The war is background and context for our lives; we can’t escape it. Everyone wants it to be over; everyone wants peace, but no one seems to know what to do, at least no one with any power to act. Good people can’t agree, and it goes on and on.

Meanwhile, we move towards Christmas, preparing to welcome again the Prince of Peace, the long expected Jesus! We love the story and the message: “Peace on earth, good will to all people.” But this year, it seems like such a jarring disconnect with reality. Peace seems so unattainable. Are we crazy to have such hope? Is the way of the world, the way of war and violence, an unchanging reality? Some would say yes – look at history.

But I want us to be able to say NO! There is another reality and another possibility – this vision of peace and good will, and there are ways of living that affirm this hope. I want us to be able to face reality but also to claim and move beyond it towards this vision.

Our readings today offer some of the Bible’s very best guidance. They give us words from so long ago, but they are words that we can live by even today, even in war time. Our readings offer practical advice, and if all people would follow it, the world would, of course, be very different.

But we can only start here – with our own selves, our own families, this parish, the other places where we have any influence. John the Baptist in the Gospel, and Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, bring their messages home – to the daily lives and struggles of their people, and I think their messages can hit home for us as well.

Admittedly, the Gospel passage brings a lot of dire warning along with its guidance: “You brood of vipers...axe at the foot of the tree...the wrath to come...the fire, the winnowing fork.” It’s pretty easy to be put off by this seeming hellfire and brimstone, pretty easy to be put off by some of the more dire threats we hear today about global warming. I think John the Baptist would be in his element with this issue and how we are all complicit! And certainly the continued warnings of Iraq becoming a bloodbath, a chaotic mess even worse than now, are hard to hear – a message of gloom easily comparable to John the Baptist’s warnings.

To John, the crowds respond: “What then, shall we do?” This is HUGE! This response is in itself a sign of hope in the face of threat and failure. It is a change from “ain’t it awful!” – the problem out there - to what should we do; what is our own, my own responsibility in the face of such threats and problems? What then should we do?

And, with that, John the Baptist gets very concrete, just as Al Gore does at the end of “An Inconvenient Truth”, just as a number of policy makers are struggling to do with the Iraq nightmare. To the question “What then, shall we do?” John insists on three things. The first is that those who have, need to share with those who don’t – clothes and food – basic necessities. If we have more than enough, we should give some to those who don’t have any.

Second, John insists that people don’t cheat or overtax. He’s talking to tax collectors, and he’s demanding that they go by the prescribed rates and not get greedy. He’s insisting that they deal honestly in their work.

Finally, to soldiers – who are also asking “What then, shall we do?” John replies that they must not use their power to extort money or trump up charges, that they should be satisfied with their wages.

John is here addressing current problems, ways people were mistreating one another, not loving their neighbors. He seems to be saying that in behaving justly where they live and work, they will be ridding themselves and their community of the kind of chaff that weakens and sickens us and our communities, even today. To paraphrase the familiar slogan: “Be all that you can be”, John insists, “Do all that you can do” – now, wherever you are. It may not change the world, but it will make a difference.

In St. Paul’s words to the Philippians, we have more expansive counsel, not as concrete, but still grounded in behavior. Paul brings together here vision and reality, the way the world might be and our strivings towards it despite our human limits.

Listen again to this beautiful passage: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Think about these things – yes, we need to; they are powerful antidotes to the many things that worry and scare and enrage us. But, finally, along with thinking, it is about doing. Paul begins the section we heard earlier with encouraging

people to rejoice, to continue in their gentleness to everyone. He assures them that God is with them, that they shouldn't worry but rather pray and remember to be thankful. At the end, after focusing on all the good things they should be thinking about, Paul returns to actions: "Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me" – look to your role models! And Paul's promise is nothing less than that the peace of God will be with them.

It seems a great paradox – this peace of God. Can we claim it in daily actions even when there is so much turmoil in the world, and often in our own lives? It's here that Paul names it the peace which surpasses all understanding – and he's so right! We sing, in the beloved closing hymn, "O day of peace, that dimly shines, through all our hopes and prayers and dreams..." This is the vision, beyond our understanding but not beyond our striving. The hymn text goes on with a plea for God's guidance – again, what shall we do? We have this vision of peace flickering in our hearts and even across the world in the hearts of friends and enemies as well. It is a deep human longing, and we should never let it flicker out in the face of present realities. In whatever ways we can, we need to do what we can do. There is guidance; there is help. We hear it from John the Baptist and St. Paul and so many others, prophet and sages of our own time. Even today, we hear the message and are called to act. May the Holy Spirit continue to guide us, not only to question what we can do, but to do what we can. May vision and reality, like mercy and truth, meet together, and like righteous and peace, kiss each other. We pray this in the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace. Amen