

Chapter 1

THE GOD OF PEACE AND THE PEACE OF GOD

13. When we join in the angelic exaltation in the Luke's Gospel, saying „Glory to God and peace on earth”, what does this mean in our violent contemporary world? Who is this God of Peace? And what is the peace this God is offering? Both the concept of God and the concept of God's peace are not self-evident or understood in the same way by all. Conflicts and violence are often perpetrated by people who believe in God and claim to be acting in the name of God and in the name of peace. Crusades and colonial and neo-colonial projects have been at different times carried out in the name of God. Realizing how much our own failings have tainted our understanding of God and God's peace, we need to turn to the Scriptures to listen again to the Word of God.

Key Biblical Concepts of Peace

14. In the Hebrew Scriptures *shalom* means „completeness, soundness, welfare, peace. “*Shalom* is a broad concept, embracing justice (*mishpat*), mercy, rightness (*tsedeq*) or righteousness (*tsedeqah*), compassion (*hesed*), and truthfulness (*emet*) all together. There is no peace without justice. But justice (*mishpat*) is not only about fair judgment and rectitude; it is also about giving what is right and just to the afflicted. Therefore, peace (*shalom*) is the effect of righteousness, and the practice of truth and justice. It is a condition where God leads nations to settle their conflicts and beat their swords into ploughshares (Micah 4:3; Isa 2:4). Ultimately, it is a condition where „the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them“ (Isa 11:6).

15. The Hebrew word shares linguistic roots with the Aramaic and Akkadian words *salamu*, and the Arabic *salaam*, which means „to have enough, to equalize“. These words share the literal meaning of being faultless, healthy, and complete. Broadly, *shalom* means wholeness and well being; it means safety, prosperity, and freedom from strife and political weal. It is about a holistic view of human security, a condition where one is able to live a healthy life, sleep soundly, enjoy one's children, and die serenely after a life lived to the fullest. The concept of *shalom* is inclusive of individual and communal peace. It encompasses the well being of human beings and the earth, the fullness of humanity's social relations and humanity's connectedness with the earth. The Hebrew Scriptures are clear in their understanding that peace is lost when illnesses, injustices, poverty, conflict, violence, and wars inflict wounds on the bodies and souls of human beings, on society and on the earth. But peace is more than the absence of conflict, as it is sometimes understood today. The absence of conflict and war does not exhaust the meaning of *shalom*.

16. The Hebrew concept of *shalom* is related to the Arabic notion of *islam*, which means submission of oneself to God. Seen in this light, peace can only be achieved by opening one's self to God's will and purpose. The Hebrew Scriptures give us the understanding that all peace is of God, and the wholeness of human life includes obedience to God who is just, merciful and righteous. Peace, therefore, is the fruit of righteousness and practice of justice. It is the effect of an upright life and faithfulness to God.

17. This comprehensive meaning of *shalom* is carried over into the New Testament and expressed with the classical Greek word *eirene*. Peace is God's gift, God's blessing. Prosperity and well-being are understood as outward, though by no means exclusive, signs of God's favour. They are regarded to be results of God's commandment to be just, merciful and righteous. (Thus, this is very different from the „Prosperity Gospel“ preached in some churches wherein prosperity is understood in terms of material wealth and financial success.) The Bible is very clear about the dangers of material riches (see f. i. Mt 6:19-21.24 and 1 Tim 6:7-10) and underlines that God's law is tested by the ability of leaders and of peoples to demonstrate just actions to build peace.

18. In the New Testament, Jesus himself is the source of peace. His life reveals the Spirit of Peace, a peace that the world cannot give. This peace he bestows upon his disciples: „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 be afraid“ (Jn 14:27-28). The peace that Jesus is and gives is a central feature

of the kingdom (*basileia*) which manifests itself in all forms of peace both in daily life and in the messianic fulfilment (Jn 14:27; 2 Thess 3:16). The peace of Jesus makes it possible to overcome enmity and division (Eph 2:14-16), for it is a peace that has come through the blood of his cross (Col 1:20). Through his death, Jesus has overcome the very sources of enmity, making it possible for all creation to be brought together in unity through him and to be reconciled to God (Eph 1:10; Col 1:16.19-20).

Peace and the *oikos* or Household of God

19. There can be no other setting of humanity's efforts for building peace than this world. The world is God's household or *oikos*. *Oikos* is a term that includes the habitation for all people; the affairs, relationships and common cause of the people in that *oikos*, as well as their dwelling place, their properties and environment (Eph 2:19-22). The members of the *oikos* have the basic responsibility of working for the good of all people (Gal 6:10). In the ancient Greek world, *oikoumene* was understood to refer to the whole world as an administrative unit and, for some time, was equated with the Roman Empire (Lk 2:1). Yet, for the followers of Jesus, it was understood to be the community of faith „built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone“ (Eph 2:20). It is the „church of the living God“ (1 Tim 3:15, 1 Peter 4:17). The church, however, does not exhaust the meaning of *oikoumene*. In a broader sense, the New Testament writers understood *oikoumene* as the earth and all of its inhabitants (Lk 2:10; 4:5; Acts 17:30-31). Seen in this way, the church is inevitably intertwined with the world, since each human being within the *oikos* is connected with the *oikos* of the church and the *oikos* of the world.

20. Peace and peace-building are important dimensions of life together in the household of God. If each is to live in harmony with the other, and all are to experience well being as fruits of living in truth, justice and peace in the household, then all must participate in the process of peace-building, spiritual strengthening and edification (*oikodome*). Each is called to be a builder of the house (*oikodomos*), building up and strengthening the *oikoumene* by helping each member to live responsibly and effectively. An *oikodomos* is a peace-builder, one who strives to make the community of faith a sign of healing and justice in the world, who renders service to bring healing, restore wellness and wholeness to the whole household of God (Rom 14:19, Lk 12:42f). The process of healing requires dismantling of cultures of abuse and violence. Jesus demonstrated through his life the work of such an *oikodomos*. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and comforted the lonely. He restored sight to the blind, and gave voice to those who could not speak.

21. Peace is God's gift to humanity. It both sustains history and leads history to its fulfilment. To have peace means enjoying God's gift of the fullness of life, security, and liberty (Ezek 34:25-31). God invites the people of God to come and be present in the places where peace is needed, to extend there the household of God. They are invited to be God's agents and to mediate situations of conflict, to give courage to the weary, and to comfort the suffering (Mt 5:4; 2 Cor 1:3f). One is sustained in this task if one remains steadfast in faith, and submits to the guidance and help of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26). Indeed, it is the promise of the Holy Spirit and the pouring out of grace upon us that keeps us in hope that manifests to us God's presence in settings where God seems to be absent. There the eschatological horizon of peace is revealed, drawing us in hope forward to a time when „God will be all in all“ (1 Cor 15:28).

O God, it is your will to hold both heaven and earth in a single peace. Let the design of your great love shine on the waste of our wraths and sorrows, and give peace to your church, peace among nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts. Amen.

The God of Peace Revealed as the Holy Trinity

22. Who is this God who is revealed in the gift of peace? In the Hebrew Scriptures this God of Peace is revealed to us as a God of truthfulness, justice and mercy (Deut 32:4; Ps 145:17). In the New Testament, this is the God who sent the Word into the world (Jn 1:14), and the Holy Spirit for

the strengthening and the guiding of Jesus' disciples (Jn 14:26). The early Church came to see this in a new and beautiful way: God as the Holy Trinity. The Mystery of God as the Trinity is simultaneously the Mystery of the all embracing reality of God. The eternal and dynamic co-inherence (in Greek: *perichoresis*) of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, reveals on the one hand the all-pervading unity of the divine. This all-pervading unity of the divine is also on the other hand a unity with and within diversity, the eternal One in Three and the Three in One.

23. This also reveals the nature of creation: Creation is a seamless whole within its diversities, within the all-embracing *energeia* (the outward movements of the Trinity) that are designed to reveal in a sacramental manner the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The harmony and beauty of created existence, manifested through its diverse dynamisms, cannot therefore be detached from the all-embracing Trinitarian Reality of the God of Peace.

24. God and creation are thus not set at infinite distance from each other. Rather they are in profound relationship with each other, as the differences within the beauty of creation mirror the *perichoresis* or co-inherence of the Three Persons that are the Trinity. It is that encircling, mutual, embracing set of relationships between them that reveals to us the reality of God - creating and sustaining, healing and redeeming, bringing to fulfilment and reconciliation in peace.

25. The *oikos* of the world and of the Church, the *oikoumene* of God's design and purpose therefore, are not arbitrary constructs. The *oikos* finds its meaning and purpose in the Trinitarian *perichoresis*, an embrace of love, peace, and beauty. Building peace is our participation toward that *perichoresis*, that eternal dance. Therefore, peace-building is not just about repairing what has been broken, but about expanding and completing relationships that make the *oikos* the mirror of the Trinity.

26. What does this tell us, then, about God, about peace, and about ourselves?

- That God is Triune reveals a commitment to communion, to the fullness (*pleroma*) of creation, and the difference and diversity of creation.
- God is at once a God of peace and justice, of mercy and truthfulness, all of which are in profound embrace (Ps 85:10-14).
- Peace is an embrace of all creation. Our relations with God, with one another, and with the earth are not bonds of contract or arbitrary choice. They are the bonds of love.
- The refusal of creatures to enter that embrace brings forth God's wrath - an anger that flows from God's steadfast commitment, and God's desire to sway the hard-hearted back to justice and love.
- The Word has entered our world, knows our brokenness, embraces our vulnerability, and is reconciling all things in himself (Col 1:19-20).
- Christ is our peace (Eph 2:14), who in his own flesh has made us one with one another and with himself.
- As created in the image of God, we have the potential to bring peace and overcome violence. As created in the likeness of God, we are called to mediate and build up God's reconciliation and peace.
- „Glory to God“ and „Peace on earth“ are held together in cruciform fashion - emblematic of the cross of Christ that stands as a sign of our reconciliation with God (the vertical beam) and with all creation (the horizontal beam). Ascending praise is answered by descending peace. Glory to God (*doxa*) is only revealed in the building (*praxis*) of peace.

Human Beings – Earthlings in God's Image

27. Together with our ancestors-in-the-faith we believe that every human being is created in God's image (Gen 1:26-27). After bringing forth all other creatures on the earth, God created humankind from the soil (*ha adamah*) and breathed life into it (Gen 2:7). All human beings embody this tension: They are created in God's image and at the same time earthlings - indeed the last of all the earthlings to be made. Made from dust and earth, they share in the vulnerability and mortality of all living things. At the same time they participate in God's life, gifted with freedom and endowed with the calling to participate in God's creating and sustaining work, cultivating life with other creatures for

the flourishing of all. Thus they are made to build a just and peaceful world, in the likeness of God whose work is peace and in close solidarity with the earth and all of creation.

The Mystery of Evil and the Perversities of the Human Heart - Faces of Violence

28. However, the human propensity to turn away from God - what we call sin - reaches back to the very beginning. There is this perplexing estrangement from the Creator - the mystery of evil - that manifests itself in shame and guilt, accusation and lies, refusal of communication and murder, cheating and revenge, fear and anxiety, desire and rape, plundering and looting. All these are indications of humanity having lost their original image and distorted their primordial calling. With this evil propensity the many forms of violence have entered our world.

Violence and the Reality of Trespassing

29. Basically, violence is a violation of limits, a trespassing into the space each living thing rightfully requires for the unfolding and fulfilment of its *raison d'être*. It is thus the violation of integrity and harmony of the myriad relationships by which the fabric of creation is sustained.

30. Violence has untold expressions. At the personal level the most gruesome forms are intentional humiliation and hurt, sexual abuse, rape and murder, abandonment and starvation. At the level of societies and nations violence is experienced in acts of war and terrorism - including the „war on terror“ -, in the grim realities of millions of displaced people and refugees, in children being forced into soldiering and prostitution, in farmers committing suicide because of unmanageable debts.

31. Violence also expresses itself in the violating of the diversities of the natural world, in the reckless exploitation of common goods such as drinking water and fossil fuels, the felling of forests, the overfishing of the seas and oceans, the careless disposal of waste, and the death of birth itself - the extinction of species.

32. In such and many other ways the perversities of the human heart play themselves out in and under economic globalization, ethnocentrism and cultural exclusivism. An insatiable consumerist life-style contributes to the uprooting of indigenous cultures. The impact of former adjustments policies and the pressures to enter into inequitable trade agreements further the accumulating of debts and the destabilizing of national and regional autonomies. The links between the militarization of the world's economies and the spreading of extremely violent and pornographic entertainment products are alarming and contribute to what must be called „structural“ or „systemic“ violence.

33. Furthermore, there is need to address what can be called „habitual“ violence. This refers to abuses of power which have become habitual or customary, such as taking the gifts of nature for granted or treating human beings as „resource material“ and „objects“ of desire. Habitual violence is also reflected in the attitude that accepts wars as „natural“ or in the belief of many victims, especially women, that abuses toward them are unavoidable.

Abusing our Powers

34. The ubiquitous and subtle forms of violence can also be expressed by referring to the abuses of power. Generally speaking, power is the strength or energy with which each living organism affirms and claims its existence. All parents know how rigorously a baby, utterly dependent though it is, is capable of crying out for the attention it needs for its growth! This basic power turns into violence when it goes over and against the realm of power of other creatures or in those instances where a necessary sharing of power is withheld.

35. More precisely, we can speak of the power that human beings have „over“ other persons and things. This capacity can take the form of maturity in the handling of relationships, but it can also turn into an abuse whenever this power over others becomes oppressive, demeaning and murderous.

36. We can also speak of the power „with“ other persons and objects. This is the energy with which we can create and sustain communication with others, offer help and provide care. This

„power with“ turns into violence whenever we begin to dominate others or wherever we consciously withdraw from others and withhold our sustenance. Love denied is a subtle expression of violence!

37. Related to this is our „power for“ others. This is expressed in our capacity to empower others. It becomes violent when and where we create situations and structures of dependency and repression or when and where we overuse the powers of others by withholding our own.

38. This way of speaking of power „over“, „with“ and „for“ others applies equally well to the personal, social, economic and political levels. At all these, forms of power can have a useful and even redemptive meaning, but can also exert its damaging and indeed perverting might.

Forms and Structures of Enmity

39. Another way of addressing the realities of violence is to look at the forms and structures of enmity that pervade, and cut through, our lives. These „dividing walls of hostility“ (Eph 2:14), whether visible or invisible, keep people from sharing the cosmic good. Structures of enmity describe the fact that the fabric of society is woven with conflicting interests and deep-seated divisions. They have at their basis imbalances of power and irresponsible uses of power which turn an Irish Protestant against an Irish Catholic, Hindus against Muslims, Muslims against Christians, Palestinians against Israelis, Hutu against Tutsis and so on. No soul is immune from this enmity. No zone is enemy-free. We are all on someone's enemy list.

40. Earth, too, can be treated as though it were an enemy. In recent decades we have grown keenly aware that cumulative abuses of human power have placed nature's welfare in jeopardy. Nature's own requirements for its own renewal and regeneration on its own terms and time-lines have been subordinated to excessive human demands. Earth has been treated as though its treasures were the spoils of an unending war.

41. Sometimes these structures of enmity are seen but often they are not. In many cases the realisation of such walls of division is avoided and their impact denied. People in one part of society live in a different world from those in another. Mutual exposures are being avoided, and therefore the differences between the guilty and the innocent, the perpetrators and the victims do not seem to matter much. The air, the water can be poisoned, bombs can be dropped, children can be turned into soldiers and prostitutes without wider sectors of humanity caring to look.

42. Under these circumstances, the old question appears more urgent than ever: Can there be an effective ethic for the overcoming of these manifold enmities? Can there be peace across all these deep divides? Or to sharpen these questions, as Jesus did, are we not commanded to love the enemy as the only way to shalom and a new creation? When great oceans and high mountain ranges no longer put anyone or anything out of reach and destruction can be wrapped up in small packages and delivered at an instant, it certainly seems so.

43. Troubled by what we see in and around us, we turn to the Bible, the foundation of our faith, and to the witness of our ancestors in the faith. They have shown us the glory of God embodied in the Child of Bethlehem. In Jesus we discover the messianic witness. „...he is our peace who has made us one“ (Eph 2:14). It is in the light of this liberating alternative that we see the profound predicament in which humanity finds itself. On the one hand we do not wish to overlook the admirable efforts of so many women and men who work for peace in families and homes, who bring respect, uprightness and dignity to schools and universities, factory shops and government offices and who work diligently for creative solutions to illnesses, social injustices and ecological disasters. On the other, however, we are faced with a world at the brink of ecological catastrophe, with warfare over the access to shrinking resources such as drinking water and fossil fuel, with half of the earth's people in shocking poverty. Above all, the threat of an all-out nuclear disaster is still with us.

44. Where does the Church stand in all of this? It cannot pretend not to be seriously affected; for indeed all the abuses to which we have referred are also to be found within Christian communities. Some among us are inclined to see this predicament as an indication of the end-times referred to in the apocalyptic writings of the New Testament. Therefore, they tend to resort to the message that nothing can and should be done about these „tribulations“; for they are part of God's design for the

ending of world history. Rather, they extort their followers to put all their hope in the coming Christ and the new creation that is to come once the old one has been done away with.

45. In contrast to this view this Statement wants to emphasize the inseparable connectedness of creation and salvation. The peace of God can not be severed from peace on earth and with the earth. It is to the service of this profound unity that the discipleship of the Church Universal is called, to take the side of the poor and the powerless, to witness to the truth, even when it puts our lives at stake, and to be communities and agents of healing and salvation.

Question:

Can you agree with this account of the Biblical sources, the Trinitarian conclusions and the reflections on human sin and the nature of violence?