

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Rev. Canon Naim Ateek, Director of Sabeel
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 19, 2009
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Peace Prerequisites

“As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! (Luke 19:41-42).

The last time Jesus visited Jerusalem before his passion and death he approached the city from the Mount of Olives and when he saw it he wept over it and said, “...would that you know the things that make for peace!” (Luke 19: 42). I believe that Jesus' words reflected a political and religious analysis of the country at that time. Palestine was under the Roman occupation, there was religious and economic corruption, and the power of the revolutionaries and extremists was steadily growing. All these things made Jesus conclude that the country was rapidly running towards the abyss; the ingredients of peace were missing. Jerusalem did not know the things that make for peace. Jesus was talking about the political as well as the religious situation in the country.

The question of Jesus continues to haunt us. What makes for peace? What are the roots and ingredients of peace in the Middle East and specifically in Palestine and Israel? Looking at the situation back home I would like to mention two prerequisites for peace.

The FIRST prerequisite for peace is a right understanding of God. One of the main obstacles to peace today lies in our conflicting views of God. We have three major religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – and although the origin of the conflict was political, its strongest expression today is religious.

We all say that we believe in One God but our faith in the one God has not helped us to find a

resolution to the conflict. In fact, we are killing each other in the name of God. Today, Jewish extremist settlers harass and kill Palestinians in the name of God because they believe that the land belongs to them alone. Extremist Palestinians kill Israelis in the name of God. We talk about the three monotheistic religions but on the ground it looks like we believe in three different gods and we are fighting each other in the name of our gods; and there is no end to the struggle.

Any monopoly of God whether by Jews, Muslims or Christians reflects an ignorance of God, an ignorance of the nature of God and it breeds prejudice and hate and produces discrimination and racism.

In the New Testament, God is always referred to as the God of peace and love. I believe that any picture of God that reflects war, violence, or oppression must be detested and rejected because the God whom we have come to know in Jesus Christ is the God of peace and love and not violence and war.

We need to remember that the power of God is not supremely expressed by acts of war and violence like we read about in some Old Testament texts. From a Christian perspective, God's power in the world finds its best and supreme expression in acts of peace and mercy, in love and forgiveness. We have had many wars in the Middle East they did not bring about a resolution of the conflict. They exacerbated our lives with more hatred and bitterness.

Regretfully, this is not new in the history of the church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous

German theologian, faced a problem in the 1930's in his native Germany. He saw the Reich Church holding out an image of Christ "as a Germanic conqueror, someone who rooted out his enemies and destroyed them mercilessly." To Bonhoeffer, this was a pagan image. For Bonhoeffer, the true image of God in Christ is the crucified Christ, one who enters a world of sin and death and takes upon himself all the sorrows of humanity.

In the conflict over Palestine, we have made God part of the problem. At Sabeel, we are doing our best to make God part of the solution. A right understanding of God means that the God we believe in is one who loves and cares for all people equally – a God of justice, peace, and compassion -- a God who wants us to work together for the well-being of all people especially for those who are underprivileged, the poor, and oppressed. It means ending the illegal occupation and establishing peace and security for all on the basis of international law. It means removing the labels that divide and separate us, and accepting our one common God-Given humanity. God does not belong exclusively to us. We all belong to God.

A SECOND prerequisite of peace is justice. Peace is the fruit of justice. Before peace can be achieved, justice must be done. In the Middle East, it is political justice for the Palestinians. Today, the heart of the injustice is the occupation of Israel to the Palestinian territories. The real violence is the violence of the occupation of Israel to over three and a half million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem. The occupation expresses itself in the presence of illegal settlements, checkpoints, and separation walls. Over 20 thousand Palestinian homes have been demolished since 1967. The Palestinians are daily oppressed, humiliated, and dehumanized. The only way for a viable peace is to end the occupation and allow the Palestinians to establish their independent, viable, and sovereign state of Palestine. If we are talking about peace in the Holy Land, we

must talk about justice. Without justice for the Palestinians there will never be peace or security for Israel. The Prophet Micah asked, "What does God require of us?" The answer was loud and clear, "To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God."

Many of our people in the Middle East have been encouraged by President Obama's speech in Cairo a few weeks ago. He emphasized the need for Israel to stop building and expanding the settlements. He called for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel. We believe that he is on the right track and we pray that he can implement his vision on the basis of international law.

Recently Pope Benedict XVI came on a visit to the Holy Land. In his many speeches, he spoke about ending the conflict by establishing a homeland for the Palestinian people. He reminded us of the words of his predecessor Pope John Paul II who said, if we want peace, we must work for justice.

The two essential ingredients for peace in our part of the world are a true understanding of the nature of God, the God of peace who calls us to peacemaking. And that genuine peace can be built on justice. Jesus calls us to be engaged in peacemaking when he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God."

Please pray for us and work with us for the achievement of a just peace in our country so that all of our people might live in security and prosperity and so that God might be glorified. Amen.