

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 2-C; 17 March 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201903152200)

Peace on Earth

From this week's Diocesan email:

We express our deep sadness and outrage over the horrific mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand. Our prayers go out to the victims and those who grieve. We stand in solidarity with our Muslim sisters and brothers and reject all violence, and especially that which targets people for their religious beliefs. Lord, have mercy.

In nomine...

I. Intro

I had a sermon all wrapped up on Tuesday. But then Friday happened. There was another mass shooting in the midst of another congregation gathered for prayer. This was in New Zealand, in Christchurch, at the Al Noor mosque and a second mosque nearby.

Our Gospel reading today has something to say about violence.

II. Thesis

Hear again Jesus' lament and the fundamental conflict within it:

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!
How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
and you were not willing!*

The tension is more obvious in Greek than in English. "How I have desired" and "You were not willing" both use the same exact word. What's going on here is a contest of wills: Jesus' will to

gather up the residents of Jerusalem like chicks under his wing. And the people's *unwillingness* to be so gathered.

What is it that prevents us from gathering with one another? With all God's people? What bitternesses and grudges, offenses and old hurts, continue to have life and divisive power in our families? How does mistrust or contempt or prejudice poison our hearts and continue to influence the functioning of our parish? And if these powers, these evils, exist in the relationships closest at hand, among the people most precious to us, what about those relationships we have with the wider world? With Christians from other churches, other denominations? With children of Abraham who practices other faiths or no faith at all? With practitioners of completely different religions, eaters of completely different foods, speakers of completely different languages?

The BBC news story I read about the shooting in New Zealand explained that the gunman "had espoused racist, anti-immigrant views."¹ I feel like I encounter lots of racist and anti-immigrant views these days: here in South Jersey, across the United States, and throughout the western hemisphere. Here's a hint: racist, anti-immigrant views aren't going to get you very far in the Kingdom of God. Jesus was born a brown-skinned Palestinian refugee fleeing into Africa to escape violence perpetrated by his own country's ruler. Jesus didn't even speak English! Contempt, prejudice, and othering only extend violence, confirming our own self-imposed status as aliens and wanna-be immigrants who have not yet entered the Kingdom of God.

A world without gun violence, mass shootings, and terrorism doesn't begin with laws or the criminal justice system or wars in foreign countries. Laws can help! I'm less sure about the death penalty and drone strikes. A world where all people can live in safety and peace isn't a world without religion. Just to be perfectly clear: Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, or practitioners of other religion aren't the problems. Agnostics and Atheists and the undecided aren't the problem. The problem is hatred, contempt, and disdain for the other. And there is exactly one place where you get to work on that problem. The end of violence and the beginning of peace begins in a single place: *your own heart*.

Jesus wants to gather us *all* up under his wing but, he says, we were not willing! We were too alienated from one another! We were not ready to be in communion and fellowship with *those*

1 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47578798>

people *over there!* We were not ready to share the same close under-wing space with some whom we identified as *other*, different from us. We want to ride over in our *own* car, carefully preserving illusions of difference and autonomy. And so, by standing apart from other people, we continue to stand apart from Jesus. By standing apart from other people, we are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

III. Good News

But that's not the faith we practice, is it? That's not the calling of our Lord. That's not the text of our baptismal covenant, in which we promise to respect the dignity of every human being. The beginning of our creed declares, "I believe in one God." One God, Creator and lover of every human being. The Lord's Prayer begins, "Our Father." Not "My God" but "Our Father." We're together in this with every other person created by that same God.

Did you hear the line from our Eucharistic Prayer in the Gospel reading today? *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.* Who is it that comes in the name of the Lord? Well, Jesus, certainly. And who else? Are there other people who are sent to us by God? Are there people of different faiths, different ethnic backgrounds, different upbringings, different opinions, different political parties, different experiences of sexuality and gender, all of whom can give us a wider, more ample understanding of who God is and how God has chosen to be known in the world? We are invited to recognize God approaching us in *every* other as we kneel together to share one bread and one cup. It is that diversity of experience that helps me to know God better and reassures me that I, too, am a part of that diverse congregation of ones whom God loves. That's how I know that there's room at that altar rail even for me, in all my flaws and faults. That is Good News!

The things we do as church are a curriculum, teaching us and forming us and equipping us for life in the Kingdom of God. They are preparing our hearts to live in the presence of God. For a Christian, this is how we bring peace to the world. The end of violence and the beginning of peace begins in a single place: *your own heart.*

IV. Invitation

The events this week in Christchurch were horrific. The invitation is for us to identify with our fellow children of Abraham, to stand in solidarity with them, knowing that God longs to gather *all* of us under his wing like baby chicks.

Lent is a time of penitence. It is a time to confess the contempt and division we find in our own hearts. When we see any person as less than flesh of our own flesh, members of our own family, we are *failing* to see with Kingdom-of-God eyes. Lent is a perfect time to acknowledge our shortcomings, to pray for God's forgiveness, and to ask God to give us new eyes and a new understanding.

World peace begins within your heart. As Christians, we believe it is in God's Kingdom, that condition where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, that we will finally experience peace on a cosmic scale. The more thoroughly you are transformed *today* by God's Holy Spirit, the more powerfully you will impact those around you today and extend the reign of God's peace in the world even now. *That* is how God is going to change the world today. *That* is precisely our calling and our vocation as Christians.

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