

Peace Sunday 2019

The theme chosen by Pope Francis for this year's Peace Sunday is *Good Politics Serves Peace*. It seems very appropriate to the current political situation in our own country. Whatever your view of the 2016 Referendum, the last two years of negotiation, or the current state of play, it is obvious that we need 'Good Politics' right now.

People are hurting. The UK is divided. Our national conversation has broken down. Whether you are one of the 52% or the 48%, or someone who now wishes you'd voted the other way, or someone who simply wishes that you'd voted; Whether you're a younger voter who blames the old, or an older voter who feels misunderstood by the young. Many of us are suffering from 'Brexit Fatigue' or 'Brexaustion' and I have no wish to add to that - but it would be irresponsible not to make some comment on the present situation in the light of the Gospel.

I can't remember a time when we have felt so at odds with each other, so angry with each other. It isn't simply that there are *Leave* and *Remain* parts of the country. It is families and friendship groups which are divided - and within every community, be they secular or religious.

What should be the Christian response? Many believers have a strong conflict-avoiding reflex. We shrink from the ding-dong of party-politics. We seek the middle-of-the-road, remembering the Beatitudes with their seeming emphasis on meekness and mercy.

But some of the Beatitudes are less tractable: hunger and thirst for justice, persecution in the cause of right, even the mourning for something lost which touches many at the moment. What do these ask of us in the midst of our current national disunity? Do they call us to stand up and be counted, whatever others think?

What does that sixth Beatitude - about purity in heart - require: a searing honesty about our take on things, or keeping our counsel?

And what of the seventh one: blessed are the peacemakers?

Perhaps our first contribution as Christians really ought to be to shut up - not in a quietist, 'keep-your-head-down-and-don't-make-trouble' sort of way, but in prayer. Before we can help others we need to address our own jangling nerves, listen to our own hearts and hear therein *a voice that speaks of peace*. [Psalm 84: The coming age of peace and justice]

There is a profound prayer expressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer during his imprisonment by the Nazis: 'Lord, I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me ... whatever this day may bring, your Name be praised'.

Following on such prayer we can hope to be freed from the tyranny of our own emotions and political reflexes. Then can we begin to see that those who disagree also voted honestly and sought the good as they saw it.

In sorrow rather than in anger we can then begin to recognise what has been badly argued and what should never have been said - by ourselves or by others. We can reach out to rebuild shattered trust; to imagine together a better future for our country.

We can then better resist all that is merely xenophobic, racist, prejudicial, narrow-minded, self-interested, mendacious, rooted in ignorance, or founded in fear.

We tend to think of peace-making as something which needs to be done overseas - and surely there will be bridges to be rebuilt with our European neighbours, whatever the next few months may bring. Yet it seems that our calling may be nearer to home!

As we head for March 29th (assuming that anything will actually change on March 29th!) our task becomes clearer - at least in the form of the questions we must ask:

How can I personally reach out to people who think differently from me?

How together can we rebuild community?

How can we protect those who have been left hurt or vulnerable?

How can we rebuild our national conversation, our national politics, and our national identity - to create a space where all can thrive, and fear is not a motor of debate or the deciding factor in policy decisions?

We surely need new peace-making skills and new peace-making efforts right here at home. Let us pray for them this Peace Sunday. Let us pray for 'Good Politics'.

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[With acknowledgements to Fr Rob Esdaile, Parish Priest of Our Lady of Lourdes, Thames Ditton, Surrey - Peace Sunday homily distributed by *Pax Christi* and cited by the Diocese of Leeds Justice and Peace Commission *Newsletter* December 2018]