

**Homily: Sixth Sunday of Easter C**  
*(Act 15:1-2, 22-9; Rev 21:10-4, 22-3; John 14:23-9)*

In what are probably some of the most comforting words to be found anywhere in the Bible, Jesus says to his disciples: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” But what *is* this peace that he leaves us? For all the talk of peace in our lives, in our Church, in our world, I wonder if we truly know just what it is that God gives us.

We hear about peace, it seems, virtually every day in the media – yet in some of the strangest places. In the most militarized areas of the world, armies fight to secure the peace. This past week the Catholic and Protestant leaders of Northern Ireland renewed the agreement of their bitterly divided sides to maintain the peace. And the head of this country’s intelligence agencies warned of the potential for global warming to threaten the peace . . . is this the peace of which Jesus speaks?

But we don’t need to look so far afield to see how our society craves peace. With hectic schedules, where time for family, friends, work, study, errands – and relaxation – must be planned for each day, we look for ways to simplify our lifestyles to find some peace. Banks and investment firms offer any number of services to manage our money, so that we can have “peace of mind.” That’s helpful, since we need every penny to escape

our work-a-day lives from time to time with a vacation to someplace far away that advertises lounge chairs and a week or two of peace. Is *that* what Jesus is offering us?

You may have guessed already, but I don't believe it is. Jesus says: "not as the world gives [peace] do I give it to you." For all the tragic necessity that our world seems to have for an order policed by force or by the threat of force, what the world calls peace is not the true kind Jesus talks about, a peace which is not imposed but given as a gift. And for all the real need each one of us has to take a break from our daily worries and get away for a while – whether at the shore or in the mountains – that moment's respite that always seems too short is not the lasting, centering peace that Jesus gives, when he encourages his disciples: "do not let your hearts be troubled." So what is this peace? How do we experience it?

Well, whenever you can't find the answer to a question in one part of the Bible, it always pays to look somewhere else, and the readings today provide some images of the peace that Jesus gives to us his followers through the Holy Spirit. And like so many things in scripture these images of God's peace ask us to hold two ideas together that at first glance might not seem to fit so well. As Christians, though, we have practice at this: we believe in a God, who treats us with justice *and* compassion. We obey the

law, *and* we live in the freedom of the Spirit. So here goes . . .

What is the peace Jesus gives to his disciples like? It is like the holy city of Jerusalem (which means “city of peace” after all) coming down from heaven, gleaming with the splendor of God, as radiant as jasper and as clear as crystal. It is a harmony, a proportion that we, even with the best of intentions and the resources to match, cannot bring about on our own. It can only come as a gift from God, and we may only catch *one* glimpse of it in a lifetime – like St. John in his vision. But that one sight assures us that the world’s peace, the one that must use war to bring it about, is not the only kind possible. There is a peace not of this world, a peace that God desires for this world, that we can help bring to birth by living the Gospel, even though we will never see it full-grown. That is the Christian dream of peace.

The other image of peace we are given is that of the Church in its earliest days, when the Christians who came from a Jewish background argued with those who came from a Gentile background about the meaning and necessity of circumcision for Christian identity. A subject, which I think (mercifully) we don’t need to go into this morning. The point I wish to draw out is not so much *what* was decided but *how*. It is important – now as then – that we as Christians have signs that mark us for who we are and common customs that unite us as a community, but the lesson to be drawn

from the first reading lies more in how the Church worked out a new peace through disagreement. Each side was given space to represent its position, and each side was listened to. In the end, each side also gave up some of its demands, so that a new consensus emerged. Christians, it was decided, need not follow *all* Jewish customs (like circumcision) but they do need to follow *some*, which were considered essential. Disagreement was not crushed or avoided but acknowledged, and people of good will were led to compromise. That is a Christian model for peace.

If we can hold these two points together – the ideal of peace on the one hand and the process of it on the other – then I think we get some idea of what Jesus means when he says, “peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” It’s not easy, though. We will always risk being accused of unrealistic dreaming by those who disbelieve God’s promise of what humankind is capable of with faith. And by those who ignore the changes history has seen inside the Church and out, we may be called unfaithful to the tradition which nourishes us. I pray that neither of these is true, but it gives us all the more reason to listen to Jesus: “do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” and “whoever loves me will keep my word.”

Let us pray for a deep trust in God’s promise of peace and strive in our way to see it a reality.