



Christmas Eve – December 24, 2011

Luke 2.8-20

“Bethlehem Peace”

A Homily preached by the Very Reverend Robert T. Pynn

An unsuspecting village pitched at the summit of shepherd hills, totally preoccupied with the intense business of a Roman census--- It was completely unprepared for the flash of blinding light and the immanent visitation of a thousand beating wings shouting peace to the world and telling of a birth.

When we think about Bethlehem tonight it is hardly the peaceful village of ancient lore. Even the translation of Bethlehem can be *House of flesh, Place of bread or Place of fighting*. It is, as it has always been, a place of triumph and tragedy, providence and fate, life and death all mixed together – bitter and sweet.

When we think of peace on earth, our feelings are likewise mixed. How are we to hope for peace in such an ambiguous world: brutal and unforgiving, yet also full of beauty and promise?

The Christmas story ushers us into the sacred mind of peace and invites us to look at our world through the eyes of that same *particular peace*. I say *particular peace* since there are many versions. The Bible speaks of ‘Shalom’--- an enduring condition of unity, wholeness, and caring interconnectedness. Shalom is the fruit of right relation, the harvest of loyalty and faithfulness to promises given and received. It involves the increase of the love of God, neighbour and world.

Shalom is the condition in which the whole creation reaches its fullness of being. This is the peace of which the angels sang. It is different than the Roman and Greek concept that also persists today. Theirs was a negative view of peace based on the assumption that the world is the child of war. They could only conceive of peace as the absence of conflict. Their definition is drawn from the idea of a peace treaty that provides a finite suspension in the everlasting state of hostility.

As we look at the evening news we might be tempted to say- “Yes, that seems to be right.” But do not be fooled into accepting ‘what is’ as a substitute for ‘what ought to be.

The Biblical tradition sees peace as the proper enduring condition of creation. It is the true and intended state that ought to shape all human relationships. We do not need to be at each other’s throats.

To be caught in the patterns of conflict and deceit is not our natural state. The peace of Christ breaks the shackles of duality and oppression that exist inside our false self and in the unfulfilled world outside of us.

This understanding of peace explains why many in Calgary expend so much energy in building integrated community responses to elder abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence. Many of us have worked long and hard to establish coordinated services to transform the lives of those who are abused as well as those who choose to be violent.

Many abusers and their victims believe violence to be the norm of intimate relationships and family life. So many have never known anything else! But peace in the home is not just a blip in the normal history of family violence. It is the proper

condition that sustains a safe loving environment and enables us to resolve the conflicts that arise from time to time.

Likewise generosity, so visible in the Christmas season, is meant to be an enduring way of living in community not just a seasonal diversion from a usual pursuit of wealth, power and status. Generosity is the natural way in which our gratitude for life is expressed and our stewardship of what we have received is fulfilled.

The wisdom born of Mary's womb teaches that we are all born to love and to receive love. We can live from the heart of love, from the core of our core.

The message of peace tells us that we are not inevitably bound to cycles of drug dependency, manipulation and self-deceit. Inner peace is our destiny; sobriety, freedom and true serenity the fruit of Love's inner peace.

We can tell ourselves that The Christmas Story is a fanciful diversion in a real world of conflict and suffering or we can look deep into the imploring eyes of the Christ child who invites us to choose his reality.

stop

step back

listen
for
the
music
beneath
the noise
of it all

nativity
is
the
resonant
chord
of
another
night

not black
like
this one

not
haunted
by
undone years

not
clinging
to what
might have been

black time closes eyes

but
here
in this night
of
sacred
genesis

nativity
gathers
all things
into
another
present

superseding
time

where
morning
opens

wide-eyed

to
a fugue
of woven
presences

still singing
the promise
of peace on earth

The peace that reaches out to us from Bethlehem's stable is a high vision that passes human understanding. Grasp it from your hearts and it will centre you in times of prosperity and adversity.