

Breathing underwater

(Gospel reading: John 14. 23-29)

This time two weeks ago, the nation was celebrating our promotion from Royaume Uni nul points to United Kingdom second place in that campest of songwriting competitions, Eurovision!

Won't lie; I didn't see it coming. Good song, of course, but in recent years that's never guaranteed anything within the increasingly politicised allegiances between certain countries we won't mention. This year, however, it seems we were all able to set aside our rivalries and game playing, and unite in solidarity behind deserving winners Ukraine.

Afterwards, President Zelensky spoke movingly of his dream to host next year's contest in Mariupol; a man indeed who believes in resurrection.

There's no mistaking it, music has power to unite and heal. It will, I fear, take more than lyrics and melody to bring about a lasting peace in Ukraine, or in any other nation, family or individual for that matter.

Peace between nations, communities, families, always begins with the individual. In other words, peace starts with me, with the choices I make, the forgiveness I extend or withhold, with the work I do on my own prejudice and insecurity; with the peace or otherwise I hold within.

And it's finding that peace within, that peace of mind, that is, I think, so elusive.

The Franciscan Richard Rohr describes it as getting to that place where there is nothing to protect and nothing to prove; just the belief that 'I am enough'.

Contrast that with these words:

'We have taller buildings, but shorter tempers, wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints, we spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy it less. We have bigger houses but smaller families; more conveniences, but less time; we have more degrees, but less sense, more knowledge, but less judgment, more experts but less solutions, more medicine but less wellness. We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often. We've learnt how to make a living, but not a life; we've added years to life, not life to years. We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbour. We've conquered outer space, but not inner space, we've cleaned up the air but polluted the soul.'

You might recognise those sobering words from a speech given by a high-school student after the Columbine massacre of 1999. It's an insightful articulation of an angst, a disquiet, a profound absence of peace that seems endemic in this race we call human.

What, then, might that deep down peace of mind look like for you?

Happy kids? Financial security? Sobriety? A healthy prognosis? Independence? A more sustainable future?

As you're thinking about that, here are a few misconceptions, I think, about peace.

Peace isn't the absence of conflict; sometimes conflict's healthy, necessary.

Peace doesn't depend on the situation or environment in which we find ourselves. It's possible to be at peace even when everything around us isn't.

And, thirdly, peace isn't a quick fix. It can't be dispensed like a drug. It's the spiritual equivalent of physical fitness. It must be worked at and maintained through discipline; and one of those disciplines is prayer.

More of that later. Back to the question: What does that deep down peace look like for you?

Is it a healing of some kind, an inner silencing, perhaps, of those critical voices, that white noise inside our heads? Or is it more of a deep security where we indeed have nothing to protect and nothing to prove? Or perhaps it's a general sense of wellbeing, of being at home with ourselves and with the world?

Jesus talked a lot about peace, especially before and after his death. In our reading today, just hours before his arrest, amidst danger and rumor of betrayal, he talks of a peace that the world can't give. It's not available at the Apple store or the gym, you can't bottle it or buy it online. It's a gift, he says, that only *he* can give. Big claim.

This peace is a by-product of a soul-friendship with God; however you understand that word. And this God is not and never has been somewhere out there waiting to be discovered. He/she/it has always been within. The only thing that's absent perhaps is our awareness. The first step then to peace within is to welcome that presence both within ourselves and within others.

A story is told of a disciple who asks his guru, 'how am I to obtain peace when there is so much noise around this village? Every time I try to meditate, there's a rooster crowing or a child crying or a dog barking. I can't concentrate on my prayers'. The guru said nothing, but took the man by the hand and led him into the forest. They walked for some time until they came across a small pool. It was a windy day, and the surface of the pond had become choppy. 'What do you see in the pool?' the guru asked. 'It is troubled,' replied the disciple. His master then asked him to dive into the pool, to the bottom. When he emerged from the water, his master asked him again what he saw in the pool. 'It is still and deep,' the man answered. 'So then,' said the master, 'you must learn how to pray from the water'.

So how do we find this still and deep place within? How do we pray from the water? Well, one thing I know, we don't have to escape to the bottom of a lake or the Outer Hebrides or a Tibetan monastery; we can practice that stillness anywhere.

To know peace is to know ourselves held and loved within the flow of God (however you understand that word). And to cultivate it, we need to work at it. We need to somehow go beneath the choppy surface of life and find that perspective of the deep water. And often that's as simple as learning how to breathe. The human breath is something we too easily take for granted, but paying attention to it can anchor us in the present moment. Not the moment behind or the moment ahead, but this moment. And living in the moment, as most religions and therapies will tell us, is one secret to peace.

I know no deeper prayer, actually, than to breathe.

When we are anxious or stressed, weighed down, the best thing often we can do is to breathe, and to ask ourselves, 'Where in my body is this held?' A tightened chest, the shoulders, the throat... And then we imagine just taking each breath to that place and gently, kindly, softening what's there.

If we're worried about something or someone, the simplest prayer is to imagine that we are breathing that person, that situation, in, holding it for a second and then releasing it.

In Hebrew the word for peace is shalom, and it's a holistic peace of mind, body, soul. God's dream is that the whole world might be held and transformed by this shalom. Peace transforms and transmits. Peace within begets peace without.

A last question, part A: a year from now, what legacy of peace, shalom, will each one of us have bequeathed to our friends, our family, our community, dare I say to our enemies, to our world?

Will we have 'talked too much, loved too seldom, hated too often'?

Or will we have lived out of that still and deep place, where personally there is nothing to prove and nothing to protect. Last question, part B: 'What one thing then will I do differently today to make peace a reality both within and beyond?'

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