

## SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, Year C

Four Sundays ago, on the octave day of Easter, we heard St. John's account of Jesus' appearance to the disciples when they were fearfully huddled behind locked doors. There, as elsewhere in the Gospels, his first words to them were "Peace be with you." In today's Gospel reading, taken from Jesus' Last Supper discourse, we heard of his gift of that same peace: "I leave you peace; my peace I give you," a kind of Semitic couplet that is repeated at every Eucharist shortly after we pray the Lord's Prayer. There could hardly be anything that any of us could want more than peace, but what Jesus here promises is not the simple absence of warfare, nor an end to psychological tension, nor some sentimental feeling of well-being. The peace of Christ is really the fullness of salvation, that "eternal life" in which we are even now called to share and which elsewhere in John's Gospel is called "light" and "life" and "truth" and "joy." The distinctive quality of Jesus' peace is further hinted at when he goes on to say, "Not as the world gives do I give it to you."

Well, what is the difference? What is the way the world gives peace? Does the peace of Christ have anything at all to do with peace among religions or nations, of which there is precious little in so many parts of the world today: Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq? In fact, Christ's peace must have a great deal to do with such matters, since the way we are to live as his followers does not mean retreating to a ghetto and there ignoring the suffering that is being undergone by so many of our fellow human beings. Surely a huge difference between the peace of Christ and what he calls peace as the world gives it is that the world—that is, all who think and act contrary to God's will—does tend to see

peace among nations as simply the absence of active fighting. The signed document that we call a “peace treaty” may well be not much more than an agreement about the laying down of arms. However precious and desirable this may be, it is not the peace of Christ if rancor and acrimony still fester beneath the surface, or if the terms of the treaty are so unjust as to provoke renewed fighting a few decades hence, as certainly happened with the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I.

If that is true as regards peace among nations, it is just as true of peace *within* a nation, a local community, a family. St. Augustine got it exactly right in his comments on this part of John’s Gospel when he wrote that worldly people

give peace to one another precisely in order that, without the nuisance of lawsuits and wars, they may enjoy not God but their own friend, the world.... Peace cannot be true where there is no true heart-to-heart accord.... Therefore, let us, my beloved people, with whom Christ leaves peace and to whom he gives his peace, let us join with one another our hearts so that we may be heart-to-heart, [joining with one another] not as the world [does] but as He [does] through whom the world was made; and let us hold one heart uplifted, that it may not be corrupted on earth.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, we have all heard about or possibly even witnessed damning evidence of what happens when there is a total lack of this heart-to-heart accord. A few years ago I saw on television the photograph of a dead sand viper lying somewhere in Iraq, a poisonous snake whose bite will kill a person within a few hours. As the photograph was

being shown on the screen there was played a recording of a female soldier's voice saying that such a snake had already killed two of the Iraqi prisoners, and then she added: "But who cares? It's just two fewer that we have to be bothered about." Of course, such callous attitudes are found not only among American soldiers. The alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, once laughed out loud at a legal hearing when the names of the victims of those attacks were read.

If that is anyone's attitude toward one or more fellow human beings, it is not surprising there is so much hatred and lack of forgiveness in our world. The real issue for us, however, is this: It's very easy to express shock and dismay at some of these revelations, to label the perpetrators as sadists or perverts. But can we say that we would never under any circumstances have done anything similar? A thoughtful email posting that I received a while back gave the sender's four succinct reflections on the situation in parts of the Middle East, the fourth of these being a single phrase: "heart of darkness." You will recognize that as the title of one of the most powerful stories in English literature, written by Joseph Conrad more than a century ago. In it, a character named Marlow tells of his encounter with Kurtz, who had some years earlier gone to Africa with the supposedly higher aim of civilizing the natives instead of merely plundering their wealth of ivory. And yet, Kurtz descended to such degradation that he has become "one of the greatest portraits in all fiction of moral deterioration and reversion to savagery ..."<sup>2</sup> His final words about the natives were, "Exterminate all the brutes."

We, too, surely like to think of ourselves as persons of high aims and broad good will, and we may secretly take pleasure in contrasting ourselves with the persons I mentioned earlier, or with the perpetrators of the killings in Boston or so many other sites

of carnage. If so, it is sobering to reflect on what Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in his long account of his years in the Gulag Archipelago, of how his imprisonment there, for all of its suffering, brought him to insights that he would never otherwise have attained.

In his words:

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of hearts, there remains ... an un-uprooted small corner of evil.<sup>3</sup>

As we continue our celebration of the Eucharist this morning, let us in particular pray for the grace that this corner of evil in our own hearts may become ever smaller, so that the Gospel's promise about the Father and the Son's dwelling within those who keep Jesus' word may mean that the abode of our hearts will be as well prepared as possible.

<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, “Tractate 77: On John 14.25-27,” in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John, 55-111*, trans. John W. Rettig, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Albert J. Guerard, Introduction to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer* (New York: New American Library, Signet Classics, 1950), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 312. [in section entitled “The Ascent”]