

- Reflections for a Time of Pandemic –
Seventh Sunday of Easter

* Am I truly at peace within? *

I doubt that anyone could claim these days that over recent decades, there has not been a decline both in religious practice, and a decline in peace within and between people. For the Christian, the two are connected, though others may disagree. The Christian perspective is summed up in the words of St Augustine

You have made our hearts for yourself, O Lord, and they can never rest until they rest in you.

Today, there is growth in violence, including domestic violence. So many relationships do not work out and we hear of people increasingly feeling lonely and isolated. Marriage and family crises never really surprise us.

Many are confused about themselves and the meaning and direction of their lives. Illicit drugs and other addictions are on the increase. We can all think of many other examples, all of which have become more acute in this time of pandemic.

Christ came to make peace possible

At the birth of Christ, the angels sang ‘Peace on earth to all who enjoy God’s favour’. ¹ Those who enjoy God’s favour are those who accept God’s invitation to a personal relationship through Christ. They do so by praying, worshipping and striving to live as he taught.

God does not have favourites: people choose whether or not they will accept God’s favour. No relationship can be forced so God accepts people’s choices, but never stops loving us.

Christ commands us to proclaim his Gospel of peace

Today’s Gospel ends with Jesus commanding his followers to proclaim his Gospel ‘to all nations’. This is because God wants everyone on Planet Earth to hear the call to enjoy God’s favour – and to experience peace as Jesus promised during the Last Supper ²

Peace I leave to you, my own peace I give you, not as the world gives do I give to you.

The Apostles are told to ‘baptise’ those with the faith to become his disciples. This is because, as we have been celebrating throughout the Easter season, through Baptism, Jesus shares his divine nature and divine life.

¹ Luke 2:14

² John 14:27

Sharing his divine nature and divine life, the baptised are ‘born anew’ and become ‘new creations’. This life empowers the baptised to love, to behave like Christ and to live his teachings which they find difficult.

Jesus told the Apostles to ‘teach them all the commands I gave you’ because, as he taught during the Last Supper, keeping his commandments was proof of a baptised person’s relationship with himself. ³ So we can say that the call to proclaim the Gospel to all nations is the call to serve as agents of Jesus who wants all on Planet Earth to hear God’s call.

How can we proclaim the Gospel?

During our Synod last June, one of the priority needs identified was to help people to proclaim the faith to others. People have in mind their children and grand children in particular. What are the steps, therefore, for fulfilling Jesus’ command? ⁴

Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptising them ... and teaching them to observe all I have commanded you.

Faith: a heart-felt response to God through the Risen Jesus

We need to remember that faith is a *heart-felt human response* to God who is always calling into relationship, through Jesus Christ. It develops over time through stages.

A faith relationship with God can only grow by relating personally with the Risen Jesus, the Son of God and Son of man, himself. It is sparked and grows as a result of the action of the Holy Spirit.

The Risen Jesus is the focus for proclaiming the Gospel, therefore, as only through a relationship with him can we enter into experiences of the Father and the Spirit ⁵ Like any relationship involving human beings, however, a faith relationship with Christ has highs and lows.

Part of the faith response to God is belief in all that Christ has revealed. God’s self revelation began through creation and reaches its climax through the Risen Jesus.

Obstacles to faith

Anyone who is trying to proclaim the Gospel needs to remember too that, commonly, there are obstacles to faith growing in the human heart. Jesus identified some in the Parable of the Sower – attachment to sin, life trials, persecution for the faith, ‘the worries of the world’, ‘the lure of riches’ and passions such as greed and jealousy. ⁶

³ John 14:15

⁴ Matthew 28:19

⁵ John 14:6; 15:26

⁶ Mark 4:14-19

Then there are those whom Jesus and St Paul referred to as ‘outsiders’. These are people who have a good intellectual understanding of Christian teaching but who have not converted to God from their hearts. ⁷

There are others again for whom failings by Church leaders and members, and scandals too, are obstacles to hearing the Gospel. We can think of examples of these obstacles today.

As we reflect on family members who may have drifted from the faith, can we think of obstacles in their hearts which are causing resistance to hearing about faith?

Proclaiming the Gospel to all nations

As mentioned already, faith in God through Christ develops over time. It matures through stages. We can reflect on these by asking four basic questions.

Question one: Am I praying for any obstacles to faith to be removed?

In the New Testament, it was recognised that God alone could remove obstacles in the human heart to the faith. St Paul, for example, asked the Colossians to ⁸

... pray ... that God may open a door for the word to announce the mystery of Christ ...

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read of Lydia, who eventually became a Christian leader. Luke referred directly to human heart obstacles when he wrote of Lydia, as Acts explains, ⁹

... the Lord opened her heart ...

The need to pray

The first requirement for anyone seeking to proclaim the Gospel, therefore, is to pray ‘that God will open a door’. No amount of human encouragement, debate or urging will remove obstacles to the faith – as we may have realised already when trying to encourage a family member or friend to return to the faith.

Prayer, therefore, is the first requirement for proclaiming the Gospel. Maybe those whose faith we are concerned about seem completely resistant to our efforts and all we can do is pray. But never fail to recognise the importance of this. We are doing exactly as St Paul and the first proclaimers of the Gospel.

Question two: Am I giving Christian witness?

The second requirement for proclaiming the Gospel, and for weakening obstacles to faith where they exist, is Christian witness. Jesus spoke of this in the first reading of this Mass when he told the disciples ¹⁰

⁷ Eg Mark 4:11

⁸ Colossians 4:5

⁹ Acts of the Apostles 16:14

¹⁰ Acts 1:8

... you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit ... and you will be my witnesses ...

Jesus had spoken earlier of his works 'bearing witness' to who he is – the Son of God and the Son of man. His works expressed both his divinity and his humanity. ¹¹

Through Baptism, Jesus shares with us his divine nature. Then, being human as well as sharing the divine, we too can give witness like Jesus. As the Second Vatican Council explained ¹²

... all Christians ... show faith by the example of their lives and by the witness of the word, that new (creation) they put on at Baptism and that power of the Holy Spirit by which they have been strengthened at Confirmation.

We can give Christian witness, therefore, to the extent that we nurture the divine life within us by praying, worshipping and striving to live as Jesus taught. It is the growing power of God's life within us which empowers us to live in Christ-like ways.

Witness behaviour seeks to be Christ-like, even if we do not succeed in this every time
Through Christ-like behaviour in daily life, particularly expressions of Christ-like love in our relationships, the Holy Spirit touches the hearts of others, such as family members and friends.

Christ-like love hopefully will lead to conversations when those in whose hearts there are obstacles begin to respond. They may ask questions, make criticisms, express objections.

Christian witness responds to questions, criticisms and objections with conversations. The ultimate aim is to lead those to whom witness is being given to understand that the Risen Jesus empowers believers to live as he taught – so all Christian witness ultimately is to the Resurrection.

Over time, the witness of behaviour and conversation cooperates with God who seeks to open the door or hearts of those resistant to the Gospel. St Paul also emphasised in relation to outsiders ¹³

We urge you brothers to love even more ... so that you behave decently to outsiders ...

It is also necessary that (a bishop) be held in good repute by outsiders ...

Question three: Am I encouraging them to relate personally with the Risen Jesus?

As with other human beings, relationships with Christ depend upon how well we actually know him – not just 'know about' him like the outsider.

¹¹ John 10:25

¹² Vatican II: Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church 11 (a)

¹³ 1 Thessalonians 4: 11-12; 1 Timothy 3:7

We can come to know Christ only through personal experiences of his power in our daily lives. Such experiences are called ‘mysteries’ in the religious sense of the word. This is why St Paul asked the Colossians, as mentioned earlier ¹⁴

... pray ... that God may open a door for the word to announce the mystery of Christ.

This is the most foundational content of Christian faith, for everything else is based upon it. While a person can become an expert in everything about Christian faith, they can be only an outsider until they actually start to relate personally with Christ himself.

Many people can believe in Christ’s teachings, but not have the foundation of Christian faith, which is a personal relationship with Christ himself. They may be enthusiastic, and even seem deeply devout, but, should some trial come, their faith collapses.

The first step in proclaiming Christ seeks to encourage all who do not relate personally with the Risen Jesus to seek from him redemption and salvation

The Risen Jesus offers freedom

We proclaim Christ first by helping others to appreciate that he offers divine power to free people from what they are unhappy about in their lives. Examples may be

- life hurts (perhaps from childhood or an unhappy relationship, or becoming unemployed or ridiculed)
- areas of blindness (such as to the best option in a decision, confusion about one’s life purpose or racism)
- crippling limitations (such as selfishness, low self esteem or vices)
- temptations to break a commandment.

We need to be on the lookout for opportunities such as when others share their personal hurts or personal confusion or other difficulties they wish to be freed of. We need to encourage them to turn to Christ whose power can free them.

Often too people feel guilt, even deep guilt for some reason. We need constantly to reassure them of Christ’s love and his desire to forgive, even of the gravest sin, if repented.

The Risen Jesus empowers

We proclaim Christ also by emphasising how he seeks to empower people to love as he did, even by self sacrifice. So he will help those who seek this by praying about difficulties in relationships.

¹⁴ Colossians 4:5

He empowers too those who pray for this help to live his teachings, especially more difficult ones.

The call to repent and believe

Jesus taught that, to experience his power in our lives, we need to repent and believe in him. The first step towards this conversion is to enter into personal conversation with the Risen Christ about where we need freedom or empowerment.

This is the first step towards turning our lives to him. It is as his power begins to grow in us that repentance becomes easier.

The second step towards repentance is to learn about and enter into conversations with the Jesus of the four gospels in a more programmed and systematic way. But it is Christ himself who leads to this step through the Holy Spirit.

Encouraging personal conversation with the Risen Jesus

Pope St Paul VI emphasised how conversations with Christ can fulfil equally the needs of a child and a mystic ¹⁵

In Christ's conversation with men and women, God reveals something of himself, of the mystery of his own life, of his own unique essence and trinity of persons ... Child and mystic, both are called to take part in this unending and truthful dialogue; and the mystic finds these the fullest scope for his spiritual powers.

Question four: Do I share how to deepen in experiences of Christ

The more hearers begin to relate personally with the Risen Jesus himself, the more they desire to deepen in their relationship with him.

As for the Apostles and his other disciples realised, no one can deepen further in their personal relationship with Christ unless they join others who are seeking the same thing. They needed, therefore, to join the community of his followers which Jesus called his Church. ¹⁶

The experiences of himself which the Risen Jesus makes possible within this community are preserved in the Apostles' Creed, the Seven Sacraments, the Life in Christ and Christian Prayer. To proclaim these means initiating a hearer into *how to enter* into the experiences of Christ preserved in these.

The beliefs of the *Apostles' Creed* are like road signs pointing to how to enter into experiences Christ makes possible. For example, it is by believing in God the Father as a loving Father, that we can recognise the meaning of God's call into relationship through creation. ¹⁷

¹⁵ Paul VI: Your Church 70

¹⁶ Matthew 16:18

¹⁷ Eg Catechism of the Catholic Church 170, 282-289

The *Seven Sacraments* are means through which the Risen Jesus draws us closer to himself and empowers us to grow as new creations by living as Jesus taught.

The *Life in Christ* points to who each of us can become as we draw on Christ's power through the Sacraments and prayer.¹⁸

Christian Prayer is about how to deepen in the life of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as Jesus taught.

Proclaiming these means for growing in relationship with God through Christ is always about the *how* to enter into experiences of Christ, never simply about what they are.

These then are the four questions we need to ask to review our efforts to proclaim the Gospel. The first and second may be the only two which relate to those we are concerned about: it all comes down to their openness to the Gospel at any point in time.

But you would not be ready

Obviously there is much more to Catholic faith than what I have been speaking of. But deeper understandings only bears fruit when believers have the faith to be drawing on all the means through which Christ is experienced today.

Jesus at the Last Supper was concerned not to teach more than his disciples could digest. In John's Gospel we read him saying¹⁹

I still have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you to bear now.

Deeper doctrines, the various popular devotions, are beyond those not initiated onto the path for deepening in experiences of Christ. St Paul focussed upon digestion images.

What we have been reflecting on he called 'the milk' of the Gospel.²⁰ As with a baby, to be given what St Paul called the 'solid food' of the Gospel will be rejected if given before the hearer can 'hear' it.

It is a common mistake of those concerned about the faith of others to give the 'solid food' before they are ready.

Conversation with Christ

Let us pause now and pray to Christ that, through his Spirit, we may always recognise opportunities in our daily lives to proclaim his Gospel to others.

¹⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1692

¹⁹ John 16:12

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:2

It is by relating with Jesus and striving to live as he taught that we can grow in the peace the angels sang of at his birth.

Bishop Gerard Holohan

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Below is the link to the Mass to be livestreamed on Sunday at 9am

https://youtu.be/AhjGnoK1g_o

And the link of the recording available directly after Mass

<https://www.facebook.com/BunburyParish/>