

HOPE FOR PEACE IN THE MIDST OF VIOLENCE



The news of war, civil strife, social unrest, family violence and interpersonal disturbance in all parts of the world challenges us daily. The only thing worse than receiving the news is getting used to it and growing insensitive to it. There are two kinds of insensitivity: the insensitivity of those who watch the news from far away, and the insensitivity of those who live every day in the midst of violence.

In 1984, nine years into the Lebanese civil war, my friends and I drew up a plan for a summer youth camp near Beirut. We chose “peace” as the theme. We outlined the following subthemes: pray for peace; make peace; discover peace; inner peace and outer peace. Contextually, we knew children and adolescents suffered the evils of war more than any other age group. Theologically, we recognized that the Christian message revolved around God’s peace in Christ that made us children of reconciliation.

The camp did not go well. The youth did not see peace as an urgent need. For them, the absence of peace was not necessarily a bad thing. War had become a way of life. It provided excitement, adventure and playfulness in our lives.

One youth liked the interruption of school and the extra vacation created by the unpredictable infighting in his neighbourhood. Another youth talked about the social bonding and freedom that was created with neighbours and families in the bomb shelter. A third youth said that his father, a glazier, made more money in wartime, because hundreds of windows were shattered daily and needed replacing.

What we had not expected was that the youth were socialized to accept war as a normal way of life. They had even learned to value the “positive” elements of life in the midst of war. Unlike the older generation that remembered a time of peace before the war, our generation could not even see the need for peace, but instead searched for

meaning in the midst of war. They had not learned to hope for more.

The only thing more devastating than the lack of peace is the inability to hope for peace in the midst of violence.

THE TIME OF YOUR VISITATION FROM GOD (LUKE 19.41-44)

Jesus visits Jerusalem only to find the absence of peace, not even a hope for peace, and as a result he is moved to tears. Considering what this means for the city’s future, he foresees a time when “your enemies...will not leave within you one stone upon another...because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

Those who miss the visitation of God also miss “the things that make for peace”. But what are the things that make for peace? The text does not list them. We may think of them as any gesture, attitude, decision, act or intervention that leads to peace.

Jerusalem, as its name suggests, is the “city of peace”. Still today, however, it does not enjoy peace. For Jesus, it is a city of missed chances, a city with a dim future, a city of suffering. Peace is not the only thing missing in Jerusalem. It lacks wellbeing, because it does not hope for peace and it does not recognize God’s visitation.

God’s peace is more than political, more than social, and more than psychological. It is an expression of wholeness. It is an assurance when parting after healing has occurred (Mk 5.34) and a sign of greeting after the resurrection (Jn 20.19-26). Peace is not simply a concept, but a daily life-sustaining word.

Unfortunately peace is often missed where it is needed most! It is not enough to recognize the need for peace, we must be open to God’s time of



visiting us in the prince of peace to experience the wholeness of God's peace.

We may wish for God's visitation whenever and wherever we are ready for it. We may think there are no visitations left, leading to a life of apathy or hopelessness. But God does not always suspend the laws of history for us. Sometimes we are late in aborting a disaster. Only then do we realize that what could have been a chance for peace has passed us by.

Time has meaning and actions have consequences. Disasters strike, bombs explode, murders are committed and abusive speech is uttered. We must be ready to seize the moment of God's visitation and to capture every moment to act for peace. How many disasters could be avoided by acting faithfully and courageously!

Thank God, missed chances to work for peace do not annul the hope for God's visitation. Missed chances to work for peace can be replaced by hope in the visitation of the resurrected Christ who is the hope of the world. The resurrected Christ empowers us to be future-oriented no matter what the world predicts.

As the children of God, seekers of the kingdom, we are invited to resist violence, to prepare for healing and to work for reconciliation.

QUESTIONS

1. REFLECT ON THE FORMS OF VIOLENCE IN YOUR CONTEXT: AT HOME, IN THE STREETS, IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, IN THE CHURCH OR WHEREVER IT IS EXPERIENCED.
2. IDENTIFY MISSED CHANCES FOR PEACE IN YOUR CONTEXT.
3. WHAT CONDITIONS ARE NECESSARY FOR PEACE IN YOUR SITUATION?

4. NAME THE SIGNS OF HOPE AND AGENTS OF PEACE IN YOUR MIDST.

5. WHAT COULD THE VISITATION OF GOD TO YOU MEAN TODAY?

PRAYER

Merciful God, in the name of the prince of peace, we remember ...

Those who live in lands that have long been affected by acts of violence, asking for a new beginning.

Those who silently bear the violence of strangers and close ones, asking for courage and deliverance.

Those who commit violence against themselves and against others in loud or subtle ways, asking for forgiveness and repentance.

Those who remain apathetic to news of violence in distant lands, asking for a renewed heart.

Those who turn peace into political rhetoric, asking for awakening.

Lord God, give us a taste of the harmony and peace you have intended for all creation.

Make us agents of hope and messengers of peace, in the likeness of Jesus Christ, our peace. Amen.

AUTHOR

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