

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Old Testament lesson for this Second Sunday of Advent inspired a painting known as “The Peaceable Kingdom” by Edward Hicks, an early 19th Century American Quaker. The Quakers, also known as the Society of Friends, believe to this day that there is an Inner Light in all of us which is a reflection of Jesus Christ. Aided by the words of Holy Scripture, a believer relinquishes personal will and is guided by the divine power of Christ. This Inner Light is sought in silence at the Quaker meeting, and brings peace and harmony, clarity and purpose, to individual believers and gathered communities.

My brother Jim is a Quaker. He and his wife Julianne now live in Fairbanks, Alaska, and sure enough, there is a Quaker meeting there. They gather on Sunday mornings in a silence which lasts about forty minutes. At times, a Friend will “quake,” or stand and speak in the meeting. It is the result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they believe, and the words can take many forms—a song, a short sermon, a story, or poem. In the early years of this nation, the Quakers were a radical reaction to Anglicanism. Quakers would disrupt services, interrupt sermons, and denounce liturgical worship. I’m glad that they learned quietness and forbearance, or as my mother always said, “Never miss an opportunity to keep your big fat mouth shut.”

There is more in this Old Testament passage that bears note. The seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit are given by the prophet Isaiah. Writing seven centuries before the coming of Christ, Isaiah names these spiritual gifts. They are wisdom, knowledge, and understanding; the spirit of counsel and strength, the gift of faith, and the fear of the LORD.

Wisdom, knowledge, and understanding all sound like the same thing, but there are essential differences to be recognized.

James addresses wisdom in his New Testament letter. He asks,

Are there any of you who are wise and understanding? You are to prove it by your good life, by your good deeds performed with humility and wisdom. The wisdom from above is, first of all, pure; it is also peaceful, gentle, and friendly.

I think it’s no mistake or mere coincidence that wisdom is closely related to peacefulness and gentleness. Think of the wise women and men you have known in your own life. Aren’t they typically people of peace and loving-kindness?

Knowledge, on the other hand, is the gathering and learning of information, of facts. Knowledge is useful, and important, but it is a lesser gift than wisdom. Understanding is another gift, but it comes with hard work. Understanding is the result of reflecting on our experiences, what we have learned, and insights into their significance for our own lives.

The spirit of counsel is really a two-way process: it involves listening, first of all—careful listening for the knowledge and wisdom that comes from God, and from those human beings who are inspired by God’s Spirit. But counsel is also the insight and wisdom that you impart to

another person. One of my parishioners at Epiphany Church in Tallassee said recently, “You don’t learn anything when you’re talking, because you already know what you’re going to say. No, we only learn when we are listening.”

Strength is another of the Spiritual Gifts. Strength is not referring to physical strength, but rather mental and emotional strength. This kind of strength is forbearance—which can mean several different things—patience, restraint, mercy, and even meekness. Many people assume that meekness is the same as weakness, but it is not. Meekness is an attitude of calmness that comes from your strength of purpose.

Faith, we know, is belief in what we cannot see. But faith is always active. We cannot simply say that we believe, we must act on our faith. Faith is an ongoing effort. We become people of faith by continuing to be faithful, and returning to faithfulness when we fall short. Faith is about trying, not about achieving perfection.

The last of the Spiritual Gifts is the fear of God. This is holy fear, which is something different from being afraid. It means a fear that is equal amounts of awe and attraction. We are aware of God as a mystery which both fascinates us and terrifies us. Soren Kierkegaard, an existential philosopher and theologian, wrote an essay titled “Fear and Trembling” about his encounter with God and his moment of belief, which he called a “leap of faith.”

Saint Paul recognized the power of these spiritual gifts in his great theological treatise, his Letter to the Romans. He wrote,
May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another.

This, I believe, is the purpose of these Spiritual Gifts—to teach us how to live in harmony with one another, to reach and to strive for the Peaceable Kingdom.

I return, time and again, to a theme that I believe is absolutely essential to Christianity—that your life is of infinite importance to God. There is a corollary, and that is this: God takes seriously what we do with our lives. Here, I believe, a response is required of us. Once we have accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior, and we commit to build our lives on him, and we dig our roots deep in him, we are compelled—and I do mean compelled—to live our lives differently. Jesus said that we must bear the fruits of repentance.

Saint Paul called these the Fruits of the Holy Spirit. There are nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit that Paul named in his Letter to the Galatians: They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This is the way that we are called to live as Christians. To accept the gifts given us and to be filled with thanksgiving. To seek and strive for the Peaceable Kingdom, and to bear the Fruits of the Holy Spirit, to strive to live a life that is worthy of Christ. AMEN.

SERMON 815
Second Sunday of Advent
December 8, 2013
923rd Week as Priest

749th Week at St Dunstan's
14th Week at Epiphany-Tallassée

