

## Practice Compassion

**Ephesians 2: 14: “For Christ himself is our **peace**, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...”**

It was not so long ago we were singing “peace on earth goodwill to all people.” We sang these words in celebration of the birth or incarnation of Jesus Christ. We affirmed the transformation this divine human activity has had, and continues to have, on the world in which we live. Today’s reading from the letter to the Ephesians also speaks eloquently to the reality of peace in the world and in the life of the Christian. Writing to the Church in Ephesus in the first century, St Paul spoke four times in four verses about peace as a core component of the Christian life. The Greek word he uses for peace (*eirene*) means “to join or bind together that which has been broken, divided or separated! It is the root of our English word “serene” which means free of storms or disturbance, or marked by utter calm). For the Christian, Jesus not only represents this peace, he points to it, and, most importantly he is peace because he is in the business of joining that which has been broken. Jesus is the one who binds or joins all humanity and indeed all of creation to God. The same peace we sang about at Christmas is still with us and awaiting more engagement from each of us in order to change or transform the world for good.

Practice compassion is the theme we have chosen for reflection today. People of faith are invited to make peace real in our lives and in the lives of others. To practice compassion is to make real that which we believe in our hearts and are convinced in our minds is essential for daily living. For example, physical exercise is a good practice. We do it in order to keep fit and stay healthy. Similarly, practicing compassion is sharing the good things we have with others. It is a willingness to go the extra mile to make the lives of others the best they can be. It is to bring out the best in ourselves and others. To practice compassion therefore is to be committed to a disciplined life built on a foundation of care and love for all people.

Jesus is the best model we have of practicing compassion for the sake of peace. Jesus practiced compassion by living for others. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, for example, because he was convince people's lives were more valuable than the things. Jesus did not allow systems and structures to undermine his care and compassion for people. In his letter to the Ephesians, written while he was in jail, St Paul notes that though he was imprisoned by a repressive political, economic and social system, he was committed to the practice of compassion. He is standing up for the gospel. He is an advocate for a life of harmony and compassion for all people. His testimony is that members of the Church in Ephesus are to live in

peace so their testimony can serve to increase commitment to peace, justice and compassion.

In our text from Ephesians chapter two St Paul notes that Jesus is peace. Those who live (and possibly die) in the peace of Jesus can affirm that Jesus is the essence of peace. Jesus is peace because, as the song writer says, he “binds us together with chords that cannot be broken.” Inspired by Jesus’ commitment to peace, St Paul encourages the new Church community to live in peace and be living witnesses of peace.

Jesus is peace and he is disposed to look beyond our faults and guide us towards peace. This approach in guiding divided factions towards peace seems to be the role the Catholic Church is playing in the present political and social conflict in Nicaragua. Since April this year over 300 persons have been killed as social and economic conditions have caused the government to make drastic cuts to social security benefits. According to the Washington Post<sup>1</sup> newspaper out of the USA, the violent protests were sparked by university students who saw on television screens the police shooting at and physically abusing senior citizens who were

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1 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/death-toll-reaches-100-in-nicaragua-as-political-violence-intensifies/2018/06/01/74bd5a64-65b0-11e8-81ca-bb14593acaa6\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.31f8d706cae2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/death-toll-reaches-100-in-nicaragua-as-political-violence-intensifies/2018/06/01/74bd5a64-65b0-11e8-81ca-bb14593acaa6_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.31f8d706cae2)

demonstrating drastic cuts to their benefits. So far the Catholic Church in Nicaragua has stepped into the gap and is representing Jesus as peace in a nation divided by crime, violence and political victimization. The Catholic Church is practicing compassion by allowing protesters to take refuge in their Churches in order to protect and preserve life at all cost.

In addition to testifying to Jesus as peace St Paul says Jesus makes peace, he preaches peace and he is the object or goal of peace. Jesus makes peace as a practice of compassion by uniting opposing factions such as those in the political and social conflict in Nicaragua. Jesus practices compassion by preaching peace. He does so by giving voice to those who stand up for corruption. It is no secret that corruption stifles the development of a people. Scarce resources designed for people's development, especially the poor and vulnerable, are often channelled into the pockets of the greedy and self-centred. Jesus practices compassion by preaching peace as justice for all people and especially for those on the margins of society. Finally, Jesus is the object or goal of peace because he invites us to practice compassion on a journey towards peace. This journey towards peace ends with God whom St Paul describes as peace in these words: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:7). In the final analysis, to practice compassion is to ensure

our hearts (the seat of compassion) and our minds (the seat of the determination) are working together for peace.

An organization known as the Universal Peace Federation,<sup>2</sup> which operates out of South Korea, has dedicated its work to building and maintaining world peace. It has partnered with the United Nations to bring together leaders in politics, business, religion and civil society to focus on ways to bring divided factions together for the purpose of peace. Next month it is staging a conference on peace in Sao Paulo Brazil and I have been invited to bring a perspective from religion as a tool for peace. It is no secret that religion has been, and continues to be used as an instrument of division and intolerance in the world. How ironic that despite this practice of religion as a divisive tool, the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, a religious organization, is playing a significant role in building and maintaining peace, healing and reconciliation in a society divided by violence. Despite its failures and weaknesses over the years religion, handled with care through the practice of compassion, can serve as a tool for healing, transformation and above all peace for all people.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.upf.org/who-we-are>

Practicing compassion is the way to peace. This peace is to be lived and experienced in our hearts, in our minds and in the world. In our hearts we are to meditate on peace. A good example is the words of the hymn writer, “Peace, perfect peace; in this dark world of sin; the blood of Jesus whispers peace within.” Apart from peace in our hearts we must cultivate peace in our minds. Here we are invited to choose peace at all times and at all cost. Upon his release from prison Nelson Mandela made a choice for peace. Peace led him on a path to reconciliation and today South Africa is on a path to peace. Finally, we are to work for peace in the world. As a church we can commit to the fourth mark of mission “to respond to human need through loving service.” By serving others we build peace and this peace will reach beyond us to everyone who seeks and desires peace. Let us therefore practice compassion so there can be more peace in the world. Indeed, let us practice compassion as the song writer says, “let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” In the name...