

**International Consultation on  
Towards Peace, Security and Development in South Asia**

March 30 to April 2, 2009

Whitefield, Bangalore, India

March 31, 2009

**Morning Worship and Biblical Reflection on Peace**

May I begin these reflections on peace with a reference to the instruction Moses was given by God that Aaron and his children should bless the Israelites in the following words, where the concept of peace is the culminating reality: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace (*šālôm*)” (Num 6:26). Here there is reference to a series of divine favors, the climax and culmination of which is peace. Peace is basically a gift of God, and it is related to God’s blessing and his graciousness. In fact, according to various teachings of the First Testament, peace is the sum total of all God’s blessings. This teaching is carried on into the Second Testament also. That is why the Gospel of John presents the Risen Jesus as the dispenser of peace to his disciples. In John chapter 20 there are three instances of Jesus appearing before his disciples and every time he says: “Peace be with you” (John 20:19, 20, 27). In fact, through his resurrection Jesus has definitively become the source and dispenser of peace for the whole humankind because through this transcendent event Jesus has triumphed over the principles of division and disintegration which are the major obstacles for the realization of peace in this material world. Matter, as such, is the principle of division and the basis of separation as well as the denial of relationship. Now that Jesus is risen from the dead, he does not any more belong to the world of matter and its inbuilt principle of broken relationship.

In this context it is important and useful to look at the Pauline formula of greeting the various communities, to which he wrote his several letters: “Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:3). Both these concepts of grace and peace are related to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. What is the inner relationship between grace and peace? It has been customary to discuss and define the inner meaning of grace (*charis*), which is found with its variants throughout the Bible. There is a variety of

explanations and interpretations available in theological writings. As such, grace is something that is freely given and the essence of grace seems to consist in relationship. Hence grace can be understood as freely given gift of relationship. In the Trinitarian formula of blessing concluding the second letter to the Corinthians grace is related to Jesus Christ whereas love is referred to God, the Father, and communion (*koinonia*) is ascribed to the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:13). The theological content of this passage is that the Trinitarian life, which is essentially a life of relationship, is extended to the humankind from the love of the Father in the person of Jesus Christ, the goal and fulfillment of this God-human relationship being the communion of the Holy Spirit. What Paul means by greeting the community through the formula of “grace and peace” is that peace is the outcome and realization of the freely given relationship between God and the humankind, which is to be further expressed and exercised among the humans themselves.

If we compare this concept of grace as relationship with what we have in John 1:17, we can see that there a real contrast between the “law received through Moses” and “true grace (grace and truth), understood as true relationship, which came through Jesus Christ”. In fact, the Mosaic law could not establish a meaningful relationship between God and Israel and also within the community of Israel, whereas Jesus Christ through his Incarnation has definitively established true relationship both vertically and horizontally and has become our peace, and in his flesh he has made both Jews and Greeks into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the abiding hostility between them. He has abolished the Law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace (Eph 2:14-15). The focus of this contrast is on the weakness of the law that was given through Moses and the excellence of the true and better relationship that is established through the incarnation of the Word.

The Hebrew word translated “peace,” is *šālôm*. The root idea of the Hebrew word is well-being, wholeness, soundness and completeness. The word occurs more than 250 times in the Bible, and its richness is shown in its many usages. It is used as a courteous greeting (Gen 43:23), and also to refer to health or to restoration of health, to general well-being, such as sound sleep, length of life, a tranquil death, and even to the physical safety of an individual. Gideon’s altar had the title “Yahweh *šālôm* (Judges 6:24). If it is rendered according to the usual structure of such titles, it means “Yahweh is peace”. The state of

perfect well-being which the word designates is identified with the deity. When one possesses peace, one is in perfect and assured communion with Yahweh. Yahweh desires the peace of those who serve him (Ps 35:27). *Šālôm* is used to describe good relations between peoples and nations (Judg 4:17; 1 Kings 5:26). Thus it has important social dimensions that can also be seen from the association of peace with righteousness, law, judgment, and the actions of public officials. *Šālôm* is used to describe tranquility and contentment (Ps 119:165). It can also be almost synonymous with friendship. *Šālôm* has also theological dimensions insofar as God is described as peace and its creator and source, who gives peace to his people (Lev 26:6; Num 6:26). Peace in its fullest sense thus cannot be had apart from God, a conclusion especially prominent in exilic and postexilic literature.

Peace (*šālôm*) in the First Testament refers to the harmony a person experiences when relationships with God, with community, and with self are properly ordered. Peace is a dynamic reality that persons may receive (Ps 85:9) or pursue (Ps 34:15). Even though human acts and decisions are significant factors in the presence or absence of peace, peace is more a consequence of right ordering of one's life with God, others and nature than a reality that one can construct through correct procedures and plans. This right ordering or obedience to God results in the idyllic scene of peace such as God promises in Leviticus 26:3-7: "If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.... And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid."

The usual Greek word for "peace" is *eirēnē*. In classical literature it denoted the opposite of war or conflict; later it came to describe a harmonious state of mind, an imperturbability that could exist irrespective of external circumstances. In the Second Testament *eirēnē* has these overtones as well as meanings derived from the Hebrew concept of *šālôm*. The distinctive idea about *eirēnē* in the Second Testament is its mediation through Jesus Christ. Christ is described as the peace which ultimately unifies humanity (Eph 2:14-17), reconciling humanity with God (Rom 5:1) through his death (Col 1:20).

From scriptural times, peace has been understood within the Judeo-Christian tradition to imply much more than the absence of conflict. In the Hebrew Scriptures, peace can mean a state of rest and well-being, physical and as well as spiritual, or it can refer to a state of concord among individuals and communities. Finally, peace can be equivalent to salvation. Although not in any theologically precise sense, so understood, peace is necessarily God's gift. In the Second Testament peace is again understood as rest, or reconciliation with God. Most fundamentally, it is equated with the eschatological salvation of the whole person, or indeed of creation itself wherein we will be restored to the state of well-being that God intends for us. When Paul urges those within the churches to live at peace with one another, his exhortations are colored by the religious connotations of peace. Repeatedly he calls for a harmony of persons that goes beyond mere absence of conflict, to approach the integrity of a community that is called by God to peace, and shares the mind of Christ. So Paul invites the community at Philippi to live in peace by putting into practice the mind of Christ (Phil 2:1-11).

During the early centuries of the church, the idea of peace as the harmony of believers who are of one mind in Christ was associated with the concept of *communio*, the bond that unites the bishops and the faithful within local communities and throughout the church. In this context, to be at peace or in peace became synonymous with "to be in communion with the church". The bond of *communio* was originally seen as both effected and signified by common participation in shared beliefs, practices, sacraments, and, above all, in the Eucharist. The custom among Catholic and some Protestant congregations, of exchanging some sign or greeting of peace during a worship service, should be seen in this light. Properly understood, this gesture is not merely a sign of good will, but an affirmation of the unity of the people as a church recreated by their common worship.

### ***Christological Dimensions of Peace***

The Christological dimension of peace is profoundly brought out in the birth narrative of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke when he refers to the song of the heavenly host: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2:14). What is significant about this doxology is the reference to the divine and

human prerogatives, namely, glory (*kabod*) as the divine prerogative and peace (*šālôm*) as the prerogative of the humankind. Whereas glory is spontaneously ascribed to God, peace has its own restrictive dimension, namely, it is only for those with whom God is pleased. The humans have to be objects of the good pleasure (*eudokeia*) of God which is a condition for them to experience and enjoy peace. From the context of this song of the angels, we can say that God gives his peace to the last, the least and the lost, to which group the shepherd belonged. The public ministry of Jesus Christ was an ongoing demonstration and realization of this basic principle that the peace of the kingdom of God was available to the poor, the sinners and the outcast.

The most profound reflection of Paul on Christ as the dispenser of peace in the humankind is what we have in the letter to the Colossians and Ephesians. Having his coherent and cosmic understanding of the Christic process as something which had its eternal plan in God, which is moving towards its eschatological fulfillment in the bringing together of all things to Christ (*anakephaliosis*), when all things will be brought to Christ as the Head (Eph 1:10), Paul refers to the radical step which Christ has taken to establish peace in the humankind. Christ is our peace insofar as in his flesh he has made both the Jews and Gentiles, the two opposing communities, into one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility and has created a new humanity (*kainos anthropos*). Christ came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off (Greeks) and also peace to those who were near (Jews) (Eph 2:11-22).

Jesus Christ is the incarnation and perfection of God's peace. In his passion and death Jesus surrendered to the disintegration and chaos of the world, and in his resurrection he overcame them. In Jesus Christ a broken world is made whole. The mission of the church and the task of every follower of Christ is to become messengers and instruments of the peace of God. Bringing God's peace to the world is the task of every discipleship. For Christians, the responsibility to be peace-makers is derived from the disciple's duty to imitate and embody the ways of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Christians are peace-makers working to reconcile all men and women in Christ because it is through that activity that they best imitate God and carry forward what God began in Christ and continues in the Spirit.

Peace works to restore the integrity of creation sundered by sin, The basic intention of creation is *šālôm*. It means not only that every creature lives in community with every other creature, but also that the prospering of one creature depends on justice being done to all creatures. The antithesis of peace is chaos, the disorder and brokenness brought to the world by sin, especially sins of selfishness and injustice. The world was created out of chaos and is called to move from the disorder of chaos to the harmony and beauty of *šālôm*. However, the grip of chaos is tightened through individual acts or social structures that rupture the bonds of life and deprive others of the well-being due to them. War is the epitome of chaos and the principal enemy of peace. But any behavior that undermines the harmony of God's love intends unleashes forces of chaos in the world and participates in the work of sin, which is essentially a de-creation.

Biblically, God's abiding intention is *šālôm*, which is why God never accepts the resurgence of chaos in the world and continually works through history to overcome it. God's peace is restored through justice, and justice is the power that vanquishes the forces of chaos by putting the various elements of creation back in their proper relationship. In this respect, justice is the most fitting expression of moral behavior because it is through just deeds that humans work in harmony with God's intention to re-establish *šālôm* for the whole creation. We are called to seek for ways in which to make the forgiveness, justice and mercy, and love of God visible in a world where violence and enmity are too often the norm.

For God's peace to prevail there must be a deep appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life and a deep sensitivity of human solidarity. As a matter of fact, *šālôm* depends on living the truth that every creature is in community with every other creature, peace flows from recognizing and responding to the kinship we have with all life. The moral sensitivity that is required for peace is dulled through selfishness, materialism and greed. Similarly, the peace that entails well-being and wholeness for all creation is thwarted by a lack of respect for the fundamental rights due human beings and all created life, including the earth. These rights are derived from an understanding of the dignity of all creatures as expressions of the life and love of God and called to a fullness and perfection that gives glory to God.

***The Church is called to bear witness and embody šālôm***

Jesus Christ is the incarnation and perfection of God's peace. In his passion and death Jesus surrenders to the disintegration and chaos of the world, and in his resurrection he overcomes them. In Jesus Christ a broken world is made whole. The mission of the church, and the task of every follower of Christ, is to carry forward the reconciling healing ministry he began on earth. The purpose of the church is to do what God wants to be done in history. God's abiding intention is the restoration of *šālôm*, and the primary mission of the church is to be the community, whose faithfulness to the ways of God mediates that healing, reconciling love to the world. Christians are to be artisans of peace, whose fidelity to Christ enables them to be a leaven and a kind of soul for the society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed in God's family. In this way the church models the wholeness and harmony possible in the world when men and women live in correspondence with God's redemptive plan.

Recently, the concept of peace has also assumed great importance in social ethics. The insecurities of the nuclear age have generated much interest in identifying the political conditions for peace, the state of mind and spirit of living in peace, and the religious imperatives to be peacemakers. At the same time, a number of churchmen and theologians have insisted that on the political level, true peace cannot be equated with the absence of strife. Rather, it necessarily requires justice and the good order that flows from right relationships among nations and persons

Bringing God's peace to the world is an implication and application of discipleship. If Christ's mission was to offer God's reconciling love to the world, the followers of Christ are to participate in that same ministry of *šālôm*. For Christians, the responsibility to be peace-makers is derived from the disciple's duty to imitate and embody the ways of God revealed to us in Christ. Christians are peace-makers working to reconcile all men and women in Christ because it is through those activities that they best imitate God and carry forward what God has begun in Christ and continues in his Spirit. The challenge of peace-making is

not an optional commitment. It is the requirement of our faith. We are called to be peace-makers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus Christ.

### LET US PRAY TOGETHER

Lord, make me an instrument of your grace and peace  
Where there is ignorance, let me bring inspiration.

Where there is prejudice, understanding.  
Where there is weariness, strength,

Where there is ugliness, beauty.  
Where there is loneliness, companionship.

Where there is sadness, joy.  
Where there is fear, courage.

Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is hatred, love.

Lord, fill my mind with your truth,  
My heart with your love,

My whole being with your Spirit.

Grant me the supreme gift of forgetfulness of self  
In the service of others,  
And make your mission mine.

For it is in giving that we receive,  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

Prof. Dr. Joseph Pathrapankal  
Director  
Anugraha Renewal Centre  
Vazhoor P.O. Kottayam  
Kerala 686 504 India  
Tel. 0481-245 4717  
Email: [jpathrapankal@gmail.com](mailto:jpathrapankal@gmail.com)  
Web: [www.anugrahaktm.org](http://www.anugrahaktm.org)