



Nativity (1423) ~Gentile da Fabriano

*“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” –Isaiah 9:6*

Peace. Since the dawn of time, mankind has sought for peace, and not just for a day but a lifetime. After the fall of our first parents, that peace became much harder to have. Outside, men warred against nature and one another; inside, man’s bodily desires pulled in one direction, while spiritual desires pulled in the other. That this state of tension and conflict continues to this very day is known to all. The question is not whether it exists, but what to do about it.

When placed in a situation of tension or conflict, most people seem to favor an external solution to regain (or find) their peace: If a broken machine is the culprit, they fix it or get a new one. If the neighborhood they live in is no longer peaceful, they move. If they are having marital difficulties, they separate. If we could name this kind of “peace-making”, we might call it an “outside-in” peace, where one is interiorly peaceful if his surroundings are peaceful.

Obviously, this approach would not be so popular if there was not something to it. Many people have

reduced their stress levels, and increased their peace, with a quick call to the maintenance man or the local garage. Nor do you need a scientific report to prove that a quiet environment is conducive to a peaceful mind. However, there is a problem with this way of making peace, namely that we cannot control every aspect of our lives. It does not take long to realize that we are not gods and that our attempts to have so much as a day, let alone a week, of peace depends on a near infinite number of things beyond our control.

When Christ was born, there were plenty of people searching for the perfect peace. Despite the *Pax Romana*, which kept most of the known world in relative peace, there was much tension in Israel, as the yoke of Roman rule chafed against the people. It was also a time of hope, so that when St John the Baptist appeared, we are told that “the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ” (Luke 3:15). For the prophecies of the coming Messiah were not unknown to the Jews, and among

them was this from the prophet Isaiah:

*“For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”* (Isaiah 9:5–7)

It seemed certain that the coming of the Messiah would result in the eviction of the Romans and the freedom of Israel. No doubt, many thought back to

the glory days of King David and King Solomon, and looked forward to a revival. Even His disciples asked Him, after His resurrection, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6) We should not be surprised. The “outside-in” approach to peace dies hard.

So what sort of peace did our Lord bring as “Prince of Peace?” Following the Gospel accounts, we can be sure that it was not an external peace. In fact, Christ Himself says, “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Luke 12:51). In the end, the Pharisees and leaders of the Jews, following the “outside-in” approach, put Him to death, thinking that with Him out of the way they might then live in peace.

Ironically, however, this seeming defeat of our Lord would indeed lead to peace. Not an external, worldly peace but an internal one. As St Augustine said, “Peace is the tranquility of order,” meaning that we can have peace only when our lives are correctly ordered, that is, when our minds serve God and our bodies serve our minds. After the fall of our first parents, this peace of good order was shattered as man rebelled against God, man’s passions rebelled against his reason, and nature rebelled against man. The only way to restore this peace was by restoring the friendship that man once enjoyed with God. This, above all, was the mission of the Son of God in His Incarnation, Death and Resurrection, for “in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (Col 1:19–20)

Rather than begin from the outside-in, God’s plan for peace goes from the inside-out. At His Last Supper with His Apostles, our Lord told them, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.” (John 14:27) The peace that He gives us is permanent, it is His great gift to Man. “But,” we may ask, “where is this peace?” Looking around our modern world, it is easy to find strife, difficult to find peace. Even in the lives of Christians, peace seems noticeably absent. If Christ brought peace to the world, it is tempting to wonder where it went.



Crucifixion ~Gentile da Fabriano

Peace, true peace, begins with repentance from sin and friendship with God. It was not without reason that our Lord began His public ministry with the words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2), and St Paul begged the Corinthians “on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). Hence those who are at peace with God can hope to be at peace with themselves and their surroundings in a way that those who are not at peace with God cannot. This also helps explain why much of the world is not at peace. Yet this does not mean that a sincere turning from sin will automatically bring life-long peace into our lives. For one thing, there is always the battle against sinful tendencies within us. For another, there is the ongoing lesson of trusting in God’s love and providence over every detail of our lives, which is not easily learned.

Nonetheless, we are responsible for cultivating and

protecting the peace that Christ gives us in our souls. And while it often seems to the contrary, nothing can really take our peace from us; we alone must surrender it. This means that, regardless of how many slow drivers are on the road, or how many problems my electronic devices give me, or how many curveballs life throws at me, none of these can actually force me to give up my peace, they can only tempt me to do so. Like any temptation, it is up to me to resist it with the help of God’s grace.

The total conquest of the Prince of Peace over all the powers of discord and strife will come only at the end of time. Until then, it is our part to be conduits of His peace in the world through our communion with Him in prayer and the sacraments. Only through this “inside-out” approach will we find a lasting peace and thus increase the Kingdom of the Prince of Peace.

