



West Bank dividing wall in Israel

PEACE BE WITH YOU!

When the Risen Jesus meets his disciples after his resurrection he constantly greets them with a blessing of peace. The Hebrew word, 'shalom' is most probably the word Jesus used to greet his disciples, a word that is rich in meaning beyond the absence of conflict or war. It appears throughout the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament, prophecies point towards a future restoration of God's shalom. There are reminders that the peace of this world is not the shalom that God offers. The peace that God gives is described in the beautiful Aaron's blessing:

May the Lord bless you and keep you!
May the Lord shine his face upon you
and be gracious to you!
May the Lord lift up his face toward you
and grant you shalom!

Numbers 6:24-26

Shalom most commonly refers to wholeness, being safe and sound spiritually and physically. Biblically, shalom refers to reconciliation with God. In the New Testament, shalom is revealed as the reconciliation of all things to God through the mission of Jesus Christ: *But you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace* Ephesians 2:14. Shalom flows

from all of our relationships being put right with God, within ourselves and with others.

After the crucifixion, the Gospels record that Jesus' disciples were experiencing fear, confusion and bewilderment. It is in the midst of these feelings that Jesus appears to them and again blesses them with shalom. Such an encouragement for us that the first thing Jesus speaks over his bewildered disciples is a proclamation of peace, a reassurance of his promised shalom that is for all of us.

The Church proclaims "the Gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15) ... evangelisation calls on every baptised person to be a peacemaker and a credible witness to a reconciled life.

Evangelii Gaudium 239

Jesus brings us the peace of God that is so closely linked to joy, that joy is the lived expression of God's shalom.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:4-7

Jesus brings us peace with our sisters and brothers. Our peace with and from God gives us the resources to maintain unity with others through continual forgiveness and patience. Christ is our peace.



Carrying God to the world sounds like a tall order – and if we think we can really do that, we may be teetering on the brink of a Messiah complex!

There was a time when I used to think that we could receive grace from God into our own 'containers', rather like the old days when people used to take their jugs and jars out to the milk-cart to get their daily supply of milk. How much you got depended on the size of your container. When it came to grace, I thought, I would receive as much as my heart would hold, and if I hoped for more, I would have to do something about 'expanding' my heart. This way of looking at things served me reasonably well for a while (even though, as you can see, it is rather a me-centred approach to the problem) – until, that is, the bottom fell out of my bucket.

Maybe there have been times in your life when your 'system' packed in, and your tried and tested methods of doing things just didn't seem to work any more. Maybe it was some traumatic experience that brought you to a fuller realisation of your own inability to save even yourself, let alone the rest of the world. Or maybe it was just the gradual advance of a sense of personal helplessness, when it came to questions arising out of your journey with God. Whatever it was, it quite possibly left you feeling as though your solid certainties had become unreliable, and the jug you had been using to collect your 'daily grace' from the milk-float of your prayer, had sprung a leak.

Every life is shot through with little 'dyings'. At the time they seem only to diminish us, but over time, if we look back reflectively, they may become the very moments when we really came alive. The bucket becomes a pipe. The few litres of grace we might have held in our bucket turn

into the possibility of a constant stream that – at last – is free to flow through our open-ended hearts.

We can no longer bracket ourselves with neat beginnings and endings, and when God removes our brackets and leaves us feeling naked and bereft, he is actually throwing open our limiting barriers and exposing us to the glory and pain of eternity. Pain, because we cannot bear, lightly, the truth that we are not ourselves the purpose of it all, but the provisional containers through which the Purpose flows; and glory, because that Purpose is so infinitely greater than anything our blinkered hearts could ever have imagined.

Every life is shot through with little 'dyings'

Once the ends are off our life's pipeline, and the certainties we thought we held are dissolved in the acid of experience, grace can flow, freely. Or not so freely? For myself, honesty demands that I acknowledge the many blockages and resistances that cling to the walls of my own heart's channel, like limpets to a boat's hull.

Detaching the limpets is painful. Yet even here, there is great promise: the more freely grace flows, the more clear the channel becomes. What begins as the merest trickle will swell, and the more power it gathers, the more surely will it remove my barnacles.

I cannot give God to the world. Only God himself can do that. But I can give him some space, and if space is what I seek, where might I find it if not in my own inner emptiness? In those places that hurt me so much that I try to fill them up with achievements and attachments. When I learn to let go of those false friends, then space is something I find I have plenty of. I can give God my empty broken bucket, to be a little segment in a channel for his peace.

Margaret Silf, *Landmarks* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 1998)