

MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

The theme chosen for this Annual Justice and Peace Assembly reflects what is happening in our world and the needs of this world today, yet the formulation of the theme is based on a text from the Book of Revelation written centuries ago.

Then the One sitting on the throne spoke: “Now I am making the whole of creation new” (Ap 21:5).

At the beginning of this chapter 21 of Revelation the visionary (John) writes:

Then I saw *a new heaven and a new earth* (Ap 21:1).

More or less the same phrase is found in Isaiah 65:17 where it is, according to the Jerusalem Bible, “merely a symbol of the new messianic age.” The note continues: “St Paul, following the lead of Jesus, cf. Mt 19:28, is more realistic: the whole of creation will one day be freed from the dominance of corruption, renewed and transformed by the glory of God.”

Before turning to St Paul, I’d like to remain with the Book of Revelation. After the words quote above, it goes on: “the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea” (Ap. 21:1). How do fishermen take this? Are they all to become “fishers of men”? And what about the inhabitants of the Pacific islands? They are worried now by the rise in the level of the sea because of climate change. Would they be happy if the sea were to disappear altogether? I doubt it, because the sea is such an important feature in their daily lives.

Of course, we know that this language is symbolic, and that the sea, with its monsters, stands for evil which can no longer subsist in the new world. But we are also aware that in fact we know nothing of what this new world will be like. It surpasses the imagination. Yes, we believe in “the world to come”; we believe in “the resurrection of the body”; but we don’t understand what this really means.

Paul tries to grapple with this, but just listen to him: “Someone may ask: ‘How are dead people raised, and what sort of body do they have when they come back?’ They are stupid questions. Whatever you sow in the ground has to die before it is given new life and the thing that you sow is not what is going to come....God gives it the sort of body that he has chosen” (1 Co 15:15-18). Perhaps those of us who preach and teach are like Paul here; we avoid having to answer people’s questions by saying that they are stupid. An aunt of mine who had lost her husband when he was only

in his fifties asked me, when she herself had grown much older: “What will this next life be like? Will I see my Davey with his waistcoat?” And she would add: “I wish the Lord had told us more and made things clearer.”

When speaking of someone who has died, we say “May he (or she) rest in peace”. We see peace as an essential element of the next life. Incidentally Islam has the same view – I say incidentally, because Islam is not my topic this evening. It is true that the Qur’an describes Paradise as a place of delights, full of shaded arbours, where nourishment is found in abundance, and other pleasures too; but there is something more: It is said of the blessed:

No frivolity will they hear therein, nor any taint of ill, -
Only the saying “Peace! Peace! (Q 56:25-26).

And while the damned are all quarreling, blaming one another for having brought them to this place of torment, the lot of the righteous who enter paradise purified is quite different:

We shall have removed all ill feeling from their hearts (Q 7:43).
“We shall have removed”: the action is completed. Perhaps this is the clue that we were waiting for. “Making all things new” is not a task for the future, to be left to the next world, but something that is going on and needs to be going on in the here and now of our world today.

Is not this what Paul suggests in a passage of his letter to the Romans?

From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we await for our bodies to be set free....The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

(Rom 8:22-26)

Groaning is both negative and positive. It is negative because it is an expression of suffering, but it is positive because it is a sign of life. Only a living person can say: “I cannot breathe”. Someone who is dead is not able to groan.

Paul speaks of three groanings. First there is *creation*. Pope Francis, with his letter “Laudato Si” has reminded us of how much creation is suffering and is calling to be

respected. He speaks of pollution and climate change; he brings up the issue of water, its availability for all, its quality; he refers to the loss of biodiversity.

Then *we ourselves* are groaning. We have been groaning during this lockdown, waiting to be free again. But we are also longing for a greater freedom from our own weaknesses, our greed and selfishness. Pope Francis remarks that “we cannot fail to consider the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture” (LS 43).

But the amazing thing is that the Spirit, God himself, joins us in groaning. The Spirit prays within us. As Paul says also: “The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God” (Rom 8:16), and so we can cry out: “Abba, Father”. “United witness”: this is not confined to prayer only. When Jesus, before his death, speaks to his disciples of the coming of the Spirit, he tells them: “But when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth...and he will tell you of things to come” (Jn 16:13). The JB says that this last phrase refers to “the new order of things that is to result from Christ’s death and resurrection.” As we know, this “result” does not come automatically; it has to be worked at; this is our duty as Christians. And the Spirit is given to help us, as Jesus had said earlier: “When he (the Advocate) comes, he will show the world how wrong it is” (Jn 16:8). The Spirit will help us to discern what needs to be corrected in our world today. And the Spirit gives the wisdom and strength to come to decisions. When, at the end of what is often called the Council of Jerusalem, the apostles and elders write: “It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves...” (Acts 15:28) they are not exaggerating. They have come to the decision, but without the help of the Spirit they would probably not have arrived at it.

“United witness”. This is something tremendous. I like to think of it as “Inspiration”, the equivalent for the Holy Spirit of the Incarnation of the Son of God.

I would like now to comment on another passage of St Paul which speaks of “a new creation”. It is taken from his Second Letter to the Corinthians. Here it is:

From now onwards, therefore, we do not judge anyone by the standards of the flesh. Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now. And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here. It is all God’s work. It was

God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled. So we are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God.

(2 Corinthians 5: 17-24 JB)

In this passage Paul gives us the essence of the Christian message. "It is all God's work." These words provide a key to understanding this passage. It is always God who has the initiative. God created the universe and saw that it was good. God created human beings, male and female, in God's image and likeness. They were created with the gift of freedom, and they rejected their Creator, preferring their own will to God's, and so by their disobedience they cut themselves off from God. But God willed to restore communion through deciding to become a human being. The Incarnation restores the harmony between humanity and divinity. "There is a new creation." We are invited to enter into this new life through faith in the Son of God made man.

This new creation brings with it a new vision: "We do not judge anyone by the standards of the flesh." We see things in a different way. We are able to see the potential of every person, recognizing that each one is loved and called by God. It is so easy to pigeon-hole people, considering them unimportant, useless, incapable of changing for the better. God shows us what to do: "God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them." This is wonderful. God is ready to pardon, to let sinners have another chance.

Laudato Si gives a good description of the "rupture" brought about by sin:

The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations (LS 66).

We are conscious of sin in our world: injustice and inequality in society, polarization, violence and counter-violence. We are, or we should be, conscious of our own sins: our prejudices, our egoism, our blindness. This sin separates us from God and from one another, but Jesus, the Son of God, has died for us to save us from sin. If we turn to Jesus, if we can truly confess that 'Jesus is Lord', we can turn to God to receive forgiveness. Having experienced ourselves God's pardon, we can

turn to others with courage and perseverance, appealing to them: *be reconciled to God*. We can also count on the help of the Holy Spirit. The Risen Lord said to his disciples: “Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven” (Jn 20:22-23)

“God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men’s faults against them.” This is the good news that we are to proclaim not only in words, but also, and especially, by our actions. It is news that our world needs to hear, since it is difficult to accept. Not to hold people’s faults against them: if we want to bring about reconciliation and peace in our society, in the world, we have to do the same. We cannot play the ‘blame game’. We cannot keep reminding ourselves of the faults that people have made, the way they have gone wrong. We are called to make peace with enemies; give prisoners the opportunity to start a new life; welcome migrants and asylum seekers; create the right conditions so that people can live in peace and harmony. We have to allow people to make a new start. We have to trust them. Without forgiveness and trust there can be no true reconciliation and peace.

We all have a mission to promote reconciliation and peace; *we are all ambassadors for Christ*. It is difficult to forgive and to trust; it is not easy to participate with perseverance in God’s work of “Making all things new”. This is why we all need the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, and at the beginning of this Annual Assembly we ask the Spirit to enlighten us, to guide us in our deliberations, and to give us the courage and strength to carry out the decisions that will be made.