

Church and Peace annual general meeting, Baarlo NL, 25-5-2014

Sermon, I Peter 3:8-18

Jonathan Frerichs

Pursuing Peace with Gratitude, Confidence and Hope

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. It is a blessing to be here together this morning and to worship God together in the unity of the Spirit.

I would ask you to listen to this call to confession written with today's epistle in mind:

Trained for trouble,
Genetically wired for the rush of adrenaline,
Built to defend, protect, survive,
We do not easily find the ways of peace.
And too often the peace we seek is not the peace of Christ,
which has as its center a cross.

The letter of I Peter is written to comfort Christians whose new faith is not accepted in their culture. The epistle builds these new Christians up – calling them infants born to a new inheritance, workers starting a new task, stones destined for a new building. They are described as “chosen”, “royal” and “holy”, exulting words, words which can be used to exclude and oppress but are used here to embrace all of the faithful no matter who they are, to offer them assurance and to affirm their inherent dignity. “Now you are God's people...now you have received mercy.” (2:10)

Like us, these Christians need good news. They do not look or feel particularly chosen, royal or holy. In fact, they are rather the opposite – aliens, exiles, slaves, wives – people whose society grants them few rights. What is more, they are outcasts familiar with wrongdoing, injustice and violence.

But amid this fragility, treasured verses shine out to us in today's reading – “seek peace and pursue it” (3:11) and be ready to “account for the hope that is within you” (3:15).

How rich it is even to hear these verses and simply aspire to seek peace with God-given hope. What a search, what a hope that is. I am sure that this room is full of such witnesses and experiences that nourish peace and hope.

This hope within us is not like a treasure buried on our property which we suddenly discover and then become rich. It is another kind of treasure, one made to be shared. Have you met someone who is what the text says: a person prepared to account for a hope beyond themselves. Has a verse like I Peter 3:15 come alive for you in the story of another?

Come and meet someone living the verse, in fact, living the whole passage. *Her name is Khanem Gul. She's a widow living in Rish Koor, a quiet village in Afghanistan, west of Kabul.*

The surrounding district looks peaceful. Fields of yellow-brown earth support groves of almonds and apricots. There are clear streams that make pastures green early in the spring. Its adobe homes built from that yellow-brown soil, Rish Koor rises off the plain like a living hill. Seeing it as the winter of 2002 turned to spring, we dared to hope that the village and the country were finally emerging from what was already then a quarter century of wars.

In one of the yellow-brown homes I met the widow Khanem Gul. She lived just up the road from an Al Qaeda training camp. The 9-11 'war on terror' began for her when bombers from the richest nation in the world came and destroyed the camp. A neighbor's house collapsed from the shock waves and a big crack opened in her roof. She told me she stayed at home throughout the war because she had nowhere else to go.

Her husband had died 20 years earlier fighting the Russians. She had three sons. Her first son had lost a leg to a landmine during that war. Her second son had disappeared in prison during the communist government. Her third and last son died in 1996 in a battle between two warlords, just before the Taliban took over. Now she was raising that last son's three small children.

After the wars had taken his father and two brothers, the first son, the one who had stepped on the landmine, lost his mind.

I was in Rish Koor following the trail of aid that ACT, Action by Churches Together, had sent during the US-led war. Using local merchants and local transportation to avoid both the US Air Force and the Taliban, Afghan NGOs had delivered three-month food parcels to 23,000 households. One was delivered to Khanem Gul.

As I entered her cold home I caught a glimpse, in a side room, of a man sitting silently at an earthen oven. I looked quickly away not wanting to violate what seemed like his fragile dignity.

Upstairs, the temperature was near freezing. We talked and I learned something about Khanem Gul. She was 64 years old. Her 10-year-old grand-daughter sat nearby in a thin cotton shirt. It turned out that the man by the stove downstairs was the son whose mind had broken.

After a while I asked her if she might explain how she manages to survive.

In the way she answered -- a forgotten widow, in an impoverished village, in a nation as marginalized as any in the world -- I heard an echo of the Great Commandment and more. It was also I Peter come to life.

"Our neighbors help us," she said. "And if we have any family left, our relatives help us." Then she paused as if to be sure the next point would be made clear... "and sometimes, sometimes, we get help from people like you."

Khanem spoke at that moment, I believe, for God. Her tenacity, her honesty, her recounting of love and hope in a shattered family and nation was enough to strengthen anyone's faith in God. But her witness was not over. When the time came to leave, she went to her dark and empty pantry and did something else straight out of the pages of the Bible. Like the widow of Zarephath with the prophet Elijah, she fetched the last of her oil, and the last of her flour, and invited us to a simple meal of bread and tea. It was the last of her three-month ration. To share it was an act of faith.

As we left, her son came out. He stood on his one leg, eyes averted from the world. His dead brother's three children stood next to him. These survivors of broken families were now another family: An aging widow in place of a mother; a deranged uncle instead of a father; three grandchildren orphaned very young.

Their country, Afghanistan, had become a 'one-in-five' country. One person in five did not have enough to eat. One person in five was displaced. One child in five did not live to the age of five. The country had been hijacked five times -- by the Soviet invasion, by warlords, by drought, by the Taliban and, finally, by the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban (now 14 years and counting). Widespread, habitual use of armed force played a central role throughout. Khanem's story was but one result.

There are many people like Khanem Gul. Their lives bring our text to life, I think. Their experiences are of suffering and alienation, but also of endurance and relief, of war and occupation, but also the loving hand of God.

No one is a spectator when it comes to such words of life. We find ourselves in a verse like this too, even if we are the one listening. The questioner the verse warns about and invites us to be ready for is also the one who hears the Good News. Questioners may be a skeptics or seekers, but God's gift of hope speaks to both.

Sharing such hope is not like doing an advertisement. It is a testimony woven into the life that we share with others. It is part of a living cloud of witnesses, and it is often going to be about God's gift of peace.

I appreciate the hiking boots that appear on your newsletters. They remind me of going someplace with others, maybe even on a pilgrimage. When we are hiking and we come to a place with a view, it's natural to pause and see how far we have come. We may also challenge ourselves about how much farther we can go.

It's somewhat like that on the way of peace. With gratitude for how far we have come and confidence in travelling the road ahead, we can go a long way together.

History will remember Christians of the 20th century for many things. For our enterprising spirit. For going out with the Gospel "even to the ends of the earth". For teaching Gospel values that serve the common good. For serving others in health and education. For doing justice and loving mercy.

Considering Christians as a whole, the 20th century could be called the Great Commission century. That title, liberally interpreted, reflects a wide range of engagement across the spectrum of world Christianity.

However, even to consider that assessment, Christians would need to be forgiven: For the cultural and political baggage we carried through the 20th century. For the expediency of planting the cross alongside the flag, and even beneath it. For narrow views of peace. For preaching the Gospel as if it is a formula for worldly success.

And, surely, for the burden of violence which Christians and churches have dragged through the years. What other world religion is more closely associated with the industrialized wars and the mechanized violence which enabled the taking of many more lives than in any other century in human history? And leading countries of Judaeo-Christian heritage remain armed to wreak even greater destruction today.

May God forgive us and guide us through this new century on new pathways. May the widows and orphans of war and impoverishment show us the way. The path ahead has many signposts, including some that appear in the Ecumenical Call to Just Peace. Substantial shifts are happening, including those where peace church ministries are the pioneers. Such changes may be slow but their impact becomes clear over time. In the middle of the 20th century a few far-sighted leaders of the emerging ecumenical movement did something that has influenced the whole ecumenical approach to peace. They helped give the United Nations what some have called its 'soul' – human rights.

That is not quite what they set out to do. Enterprising Protestant churches wanted to secure the right of religious liberty after World War II so that missionaries would be able to preach freely anywhere in the post-war world. But these church advocates came to realize ahead of their time that the only way forward was not to give religious freedom, or churchly plans, special treatment. It took courage and confidence, but they made the decision not to treat religious freedom as a special right. They decided to place it firmly in the context of human rights which all people person possess – not because they are a Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or Jew – but

because they are all human beings. That ecumenical decision was not just good international politics. It was good missiology and good inter-religious relations as well.

This historic but unfinished shift for world religions brings much to the pursuit of peace. It challenges pernicious combinations of violence and religion – those of the cross and the sword, of flags and altars, of crusaders and conquistadors, of forced conversions to someone else's religion and forced conscriptions into any army.

That solid affirmation of human dignity can be a key to what Christians, repentant and forgiven, contribute to the 21st century. The answer will depend in part on the degree of Christian unity in the pursuit of peace.

We have more reasons than ever for united action. Is this the opportunity that beckons to us in the Busan commitment to begin a pilgrimage of justice and peace? As the Way of Just Peace statement says, "Peace is a pattern of life that reflects our human participation in God's love for all creation." If so, can Christians become known in the 21st century for a pattern of life in Christ and a spirit of partnership for peace?

Can the Gospel be lived in how we work to build a common future – protecting vulnerable people, caring for the endangered earth, practicing reverence for life and faith in God? These are the Bible verses which anyone can understand: love our neighbors, love our enemies, and love ourselves.

If that is the substance of the hope within us, then we can look forward with true confidence. The century needed now is a Great Commandment century. God is most ready with hope. The world will know it when they see it and, surely, will give thanks.

The peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds.