

SERMON 9<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2008...REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

We entered the parish conference room in stony silence.

For several weeks I had noticed the two of them – mature women, well-established, well-grounded in the Lord – but at odds with one another.

They had been planning a special event, but had disagreed over the menu. One of them wanted an item dear to her ethnic tradition; the other wanted only what everyone was used to. One of them wanted to try something different; the other wanted to keep things the way they had always been. And though it seemed just to be about food, it became obvious that it was about more than food. It was about power. It was about authority. It was about pride. Who would back down? Neither of them. And when name-calling began and other church members started to notice and to take sides, I knew that as the parish priest I must step in. So here we were, in the conference room, in stony silence.

As usual we prayed and then we began. I asked each to describe not only her case but also what she was feeling about the other. Each protested that she had nothing against her sister in Christ, oh, no, everything was fine, except ... But after "except" came from first one and then the other came a torrent of complaint and criticism. The room was awash with anger and accusation. For this I went to University and

Theological College? To judge between entrée items at the next church dinner? But of course it was about far more than that. I pleaded, I interpreted, I urged, I admonished. And finally, so I thought, I had a breakthrough. Angry woman number one turned to angry woman number two and said, "I was wrong. I should not have said what I said. Will you forgive me?" Ah, great moment, "Will you forgive me?"

To which number two replied, with words that pierced like knives, "Well, no". She proceeded to repeat the old arguments one more time. "Will you forgive?" "Well, no." I was beaten. I left that night, worn out, because there was no resolution and no peace.

In the musical, "South Pacific", Lieutenant Cable sings, "You've got to be taught to hate and fear, you've got to be taught from year to year, and it's got to be drummed in your dear little ear. You've got to be carefully taught!" The idea is that we are naturally peaceful people, but we are taught hostility by others. Supposedly if you leave us alone we are sweet innocents whom others corrupt with hateful teachings. We might wish that were so, but both history and theology teach us that it is not true. Ever since Cain rose up against Abel, at least in terms of story, we have known that hostility, self-justification, and pride, are what we do. Ever

since Lot argued with Abraham, ever since Sarah sent Hagar into the wilderness, we have known that what is base and native to us is certainly not 'harmony'. And that means we have to be carefully taught, all right; but it is not that somebody has to teach us how to fight. Instead somebody has to teach us the way of peace.

The prophet Micah had a vision about that.

What a vision that is! That to the house of the Lord all peoples would come to learn not war, but the art of peace. That to the people of God the nations might come to find out how to move from unending hostility to eternal peace. What a vision! Let's examine this more closely, this idea that the house of God is a house of peacemaking.

First, notice what the house of the Lord must teach if it is to be a house of peacemaking. The house of the Lord must teach, quite simply, God's ways, God's truths. If we are to be a house of peacemaking, we must diligently and clearly teach the *whole* counsel of God. "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways . . . ." His ways . . . The most fundamental task we have is to teach our struggling world who God is and what He is about. And not comfortable selections but . . . all of it!

Secondly, following closely on that, Micah tells us that God's call to be a house of peacemaking is not only teaching God's ways; it is also walking in His paths. "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." To be a house of peacemaking, we must not only teach substantial truths; we must model them. We must live them, act them out in sincerity, honesty, vulnerability, and buckets full of self-giving love. If we are to be a house of peacemaking, then we must show the world what reconciled relationships look like.

Just this week I heard from someone on the radio, a phrase I have heard too many times. I heard the charge that "the church is the only army in the world that shoots its own wounded." Do you know what that means? Someone gets into inappropriate behaviour, and we put him out. Someone does something wrong, and we ask him to leave. When I was a curate, there was a young man in the church, the Treasurer with a banking background who stole from us large amounts of money. Of course, we had to relieve him of all leadership roles. That was the right thing to do. But then we failed to take the next steps. We failed to work with him toward repentance and forgiveness. He kept on attending the

church, for a while; but then we saw him less and less. Still no one intervened; no one, least of all the clergy, did anything except let him go. It was not long until we did not see him at all, and, I am afraid, we may even have thought "Good riddance." We shot our walking wounded and eventually we lost him entirely. Sadly, and judgmentally on us a few years afterwards he died of cancer in his mid-thirties, broken, alone, and in some sense still despised.

If the church is to be a house of peacemaking, then we must walk in God's paths. We must model peacemaking. We must be a community where it does not matter so much where you have been, or what you have done, but that you are here and that you are walking the way of the Cross. The Church is not just a bunch of law-abiding middle-class folks who get together every Sunday to applaud one another for being nice. It is a gathering of the wounded and the hurting, the broken and the distressed, all of whom are being brought back to life by the Spirit of God. It is a fellowship of the last, the least, the lost, and the lonely, who do not prey on one another's faults. Rather they feel one another's pain and heal one another's hurts. They carry the gift of peace, costly peace, to one another. To be a house of peacemaking is not only to teach God's truths, but also to walk in God's paths.

Thirdly, that will require sharp instruments. That will take honed skills. Peacemaking is not some vague ideal without any particular skills. If we are to be a house of peacemaking, we need to develop the right tools. Micah's image is very apt. "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks". God's people need to become equipped for peacemaking. Good intentions does not get it done; change of culture, change of tools, change of purpose is essential. Once the sword is turned into a ploughshare, it is still a blade, but it is used for the common good and in some sense for global help and not for the wielding of power. Exactly the same is true for the blade of a spear which is refashioned to become something that prunes and helps a tree to grow and mature and to bear fruit. Any Hebrew scholar will tell you that the words for sword and plowshare, and those of spear and pruning hook are really very alike...but the nature of change from one to the other is profound. Our change of nature must be similarly profound. We must be refashioned to the very core by God himself...and that can happen.

You see, sometimes we don't focus on such refashioning such re-equipping in order to make a difference. We will try very hard to reshape our very purpose to fulfil the law and purpose of God, but sometimes I think when we get afraid, overworked, threatened

undermined, we go to our default position... we find that cupboard where for safety reasons we have carefully stashed a combatative weapon... but would never call it a sword or a spear and yet the cupboard appears all too easily, the weapons come out and then the default position again becomes the norm... does this ring any bells when we think of world leaders, and world wars!

The Church needs to be prophetic for a war torn world in its conflict resolution and its way of achieving same, and the Church needs to begin with you and with me because the Church is you and me.

So, where are we now? What have we learned from Micah? We have learned that to be a house of peacemaking we must commit to teaching God's ways, all of them, the inconvenient as well as the convenient, the demanding as well as the pleasurable. It will not do to be half-hearted about who God is and what He expects. The world needs us to teach His ways. His ways are not always as discernable and expected as we might like to believe.

We have learned that to be a house of peacemaking, we need to walk in His paths, we need to model peace-filled lives. We need one another, warts and all. The world needs us to show that we can walk in His paths.

Beyond that, we have learned that to be a house of peacemaking, we need to equip ourselves with instruments we can really use. We need to do more than blunder along whispering sweet nothings. We need to teach useful stuff, swords into plowshares and spears into pruninghooks in word and action.

But Micah wants us to see one thing more. One more element in becoming a house of peacemaking. This house of peacemaking begins with people of peace. It begins with personal peace. It starts with individuals who know a peace that passes understanding. When I hear Micah promise that “they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid”, I hear him telling us that it is only when we are spiritually secure that we can be authentic peacemakers. It is only when we know peace within that we can make peace without. It is only when we have in our minds and hearts a profound peace about who we are that we can make peace for others. The world’s peace issues will never be resolved until you and I resolve our own internal peace.

My own peace came ten years ago, twenty years after ordination. My own peace when I realised through Cursillo for the first time that God

loved me for who I was then, not for what I had been, not for what I aimed to be, not through any effort of my own...but simply me then and there warts and all. Through that week-end it became life changingly clear that I was actually free to act and to be as God wanted me to...all the tea shirts had not only been bought but were then put away...for good. Me, self, ego, was of diminishing importance...the freedom to love as God loved me was of immense importance and I hope it still is.

Such peace I would wish for all, as it gives the freedom necessary to reflect God's ways to the world.. a tough task for the Church but who else will?