

PEACE IN CONFLICT

By JAMES McPOLIN

MY PEACE I give to you': Christ's promise of peace in the Fourth Gospel (Jn 14,27) to christian disciples as he goes to his death can strike a very unrealistic note. There is scarcely a trace of conflict or struggle either in the way he speaks or acts before death. The farewell message of Jesus in this gospel (13,31 - 17,26) reads more like a complete success story as he speaks of his glorification, his own undying love of his Father and his abiding presence among his disciples. It is disconcerting that a man facing the torture of crucifixion could speak so emphatically about peace and victory (14,27; 16,33) and say so little about his experience of failure and rejection: 'I have said this to you, that in me you may find peace . . . I have overcome the world'.

Peace without conflict?

Can we in any way identify Christ with our peacemakers of today who suffer and struggle themselves as they try to touch and heal the wounds of division? The gift of peace only comes through those who, in spite of their own fears, discouragement and weariness, actively face the reality of conflict and division in order to reconcile and achieve peace through justice. In fact, the Fourth Gospel can easily generate an atmosphere of peace that leaves us uneasy. The evangelist seems to opt for a liberation, victory and peace without the pains, struggles and conflicts which we have to face in order to find peace. Not only does Jesus speak of victory and peace on the eve of his passion; even during his passion he appears to be powerful rather than powerless. He goes to his suffering more as the victor than the victim. 'Then Jesus, knowing all that was to befall him, came forward and said . . . "Whom do you seek?"' He is master of the situation, fully in control and he takes the initiative in the events that lead to his death. Under interrogation he becomes the interrogator: 'Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard me. . . . If I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' He emerges as the judge of his own judge, Pilate: 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from above; therefore

he who delivered me to you has the greater sin' (18,4.21.23; 19,11).

Our own struggles for inner peace are reflected more humanly in the other gospels than in John. In the tension, struggles and inner debate that go on within us as we seek to make the right choices and to give ourselves more fully to the reality of our life with God and with others, we get courage and hope from Christ in Gethsemane as he struggles to accept the reality of what lies ahead of him: conflict, pain and abandonment by his closest friends. 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this suffering (cup) from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will' (Mk 14,36). In the other gospels we watch Jesus faltering on the road to Calvary and experiencing the absence of God with a cry of total desolation: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk 15,34)

John, on the other hand, does not describe any temptations at the beginning or any anguish at the end. His final message is one of consolation; there is no agony in Gethsemane, no mockery of the crucified; and his death is a peaceful passing-over from this world to glory with his Father rather than a passion, a suffering experience. It is a victorious 'lifting up' of Jesus in triumph on the cross, whence he draws humanity by laying down his life for friends out of love. In fact, after the strident rejection of Jesus by the crowd before Pilate, Calvary is somehow a place of peace and calm and Jesus's last word is a cry of triumph: 'It is finished': that is, I have brought to perfect completion the most supreme expression of my love, the work my Father had given me to do (Jn 19,30; 12,32; 13,1).

John seems to focus on the glory and the ecstasy and gives little attention to the struggles and conflicts on Jesus's way to the peace of his Father. Reading the Fourth Gospel is like listening to only one movement of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony; we seem to hear only the fifth movement which is about the stillness after the storm. In fact, the story of Jesus's life and death seems to create such a mood of calm and stillness without any storm that some writers maintain that the johannine Jesus is 'God going about earth'¹ and that he cannot be understood as a real man. He does not really change himself but only his place. Human fate is thrust upon him so that in a divine manner he may endure it and overcome it. However, many people say they find themselves closer to God and to Christ in this gospel than in any other book they know because of its reflective quality and because of the distinctively contemplative element in John's presentation of our communion with Christ through faith and love.

A conflict situation

But there is a danger of misunderstanding the 'contemplative' aspect of the gospel. A peace and stillness that is fostered by a purely privatized spirituality of communion with God could insulate us from the reality of our lives with its conflicts and diminish our commitment to the struggles and the needs of others. Peace-talk, too, that does not face the reality of conflict and division is unreal and ineffective. The Fourth Gospel can convey an impression of unreality if we do not look to the immediate situations and urgent needs of those to whom the gospel was first addressed, if we do not take into account that a significant part of its message is addressed to a christian community experiencing conflict. We need to see the gospel as a help to a community seeking to find peace in this conflict.

Towards the end of the first century, the johannine community, living in a cosmopolitan world of Asia Minor, in the area of Ephesus, were confronted by a situation in which faith in Christ entailed hostility from the 'world', a 'tribulation' not unlike that of Christ himself. The message of Jesus is for them: 'I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but have courage, I have overcome the world' (16,33). This 'world' has continued to reject the Word so vigorously and so violently that such johannine terms as 'light' and 'darkness' represented no vapid sentimental clichés but bitter conflicts between 'the apparent madness of a minority cult and the manifest wisdom of a dominant majority'.²

We must ask how the gospel reads the plight of that minority, how it responds to their needs, consoles and enables them to find a way to peace in 'tribulation'. The main concern of the gospel is to strengthen the commitment of a jewish-christian and gentile community to the person of Christ by refocusing their faith more sharply on him. Primarily, it discloses to us a Christ as he was presented to a community towards the end of the first century and, therefore, it radically refashions earlier traditions of christian faith in the light of a particular, lived situation of this community. It is the product of several editorial stages, finally unified into a coherent literary and theological work in the context of a johannine school and intended to strengthen the faith of the community in the face of the particular conflicts and difficulties they experienced. The gospel seeks to give meaning to these experiences in the light of Jesus's message, of his death and resurrection. The community situation of

conflict is mirrored in the story of the man born blind. His parents refuse to answer the question of 'the Jews':

'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' . . . They feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess him (Jesus) to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue (9,19.22).

This last phrase refers to their contemporary situation when jewish-Christians were formally expelled from the jewish religious community (cf 12,42; 16,2). This had distressing personal and social consequences for them. It was a blow to them since they had hoped that their faith in Jesus was something they could hold while they continued their synagogue life, their business and social life with their own people, along with their traditional jewish practices. The gospel even refers, indirectly, to some Jews of that time who were drawn to faith in Christ, but out of fear of the social consequences they did not want to confess their faith publicly since they would be excluded from the jewish community (12,42-43).

This story shows up the divisive and painful situation separating jewish-Christians from the jewish community around them. On the other side, the jewish community, since the capture of Jerusalem, had been deprived of the religious centre of their cult and national life. Therefore Judaism, weakened as it was socially and politically, felt the need to preserve itself from disintegration. In order to preserve the unity of the remnant it was necessary to eliminate any source of division on the religious-doctrinal level. Faced, then, with a sect which confessed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the synagogue at Jamnia (the new teaching centre of Judaism west of Jerusalem) called on faithful Jews to consider as excluded from the community all deviators, including Christians, in the context of a prayer of the synagogue service, called the 'eighteen benedictions'. Anyone who failed to pray this benediction aloud was taken to believe that Jesus was the Christ and was 'put out of the synagogue'.

If we read the gospel in the light of this situation we will find that it is not such a peaceful gospel after all. In fact, it discloses certain hostile attitudes within the johannine community. For example, 'the Jews' is frequently used in a negative and hostile sense. Directly, the gospel envisages the situation where johannine Christians had been excluded by 'the Jews' from the synagogue in Ephesus and, indirectly, the lifetime of Jesus when he was in conflict himself with the religious authorities (Mk 15,1; Jn 18,28-31). The prolonged and

severe conflict in the Fourth Gospel between Jesus and 'the Jews' during his public ministry (chs 5 & 7-10) portrays also the tension between the johannine community and the synagogue. For them this is their experience of conflict between 'light' and 'darkness', between their own life of faith and the unbelief they encounter. It revolves around the person of Jesus (that is, his origin and his authority as Son of God) and the Law as interpreted by the contemporary normative Judaism of the synagogue.

This conflict or 'tribulation' even led to persecution, resulting in death for some (16,2 - 4.33). As long as Christians were considered Jews they would not be forced to take part in emperor worship since Judaism was tolerated by the roman authorities. Therefore, failure to adhere to pagan customs and to participate in emperor worship created problems: they could be denounced publicly as no longer belonging to the jewish community.

The gospel, then, originates in a situation of conflict when the jewish community of the synagogue was struggling to maintain its identity and when a group of jewish-Christians was emerging painfully as a distinct community outside the synagogue. In different areas and different times in the first century there were varying relations between Jews who believed in Jesus and Jews who did not, and these relations were not always hostile. In johannine Christianity, because of its peculiar history, we see one of the most hostile relationships. Once the gospel with its antagonistic references to 'the Jews' was circulated among gentile Christians, it acquired an anti-semitic potential that has been abundantly and tragically actualized in the course of christian history. Paradoxically, however, these hostile references testify to the jewishness of the gospel. They express the sadness and anger of Christians at being severed from their jewish roots, since 'salvation is from the Jews' (4,42). Besides, the gospel does not condemn or cut off dialogue with Judaism: a jewish-Christian is a 'true Israelite' like Nathanael and not an enemy of his own people; he acknowledges Jesus as 'Son of God, King of Israel, the one about whom Moses wrote in the Law and also the prophets' (1,43-49). While the Jews of the synagogue saw an opposition between Jesus and the Law as they practised it, the johannine community saw Jesus as the Son of God who fulfils the scriptures and has authority over the Law of the sabbath.

A message of peace

What message of peace does the gospel bring to Christians in this

situation of conflict? There is no doubt but that it squarely faces the division, conflict and the suffering this brings. It speaks of an ongoing-struggle between 'light' and 'darkness'. It seeks to give confidence and strength to the community for their here-and-now situation rather than to hold out an after-life, final solution. Less frequently, and often only indirectly, does the gospel speak of an after-life, peace and communion with Christ. It invites the community to become more aware of the effective presence of the living Lord in their lives. Thus the message of Christ's presence in the community is more timeless, as the evangelist moves further away from the historical Christ than in the other gospels, and brings to the forefront the pragmatic factor of the personal presence of the risen Jesus with his own. There is a displacement of an historical element by a new emphasis on present christian experience and on the fact of the present union of Jesus with the community of believers: 'I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you' (14,21).

This is particularly true of the farewell message of Jesus (13,31-17,26). This reflects various stages of an advanced and ongoing reflection of the community, in the light of earlier traditions they have received and in the light of the Spirit, on the meaning of Jesus's death and resurrection. This is not the message of a dead man who can speak no more. It reflects the community understanding of the presence of the risen Jesus. Although for the evangelist those who hear Jesus are his immediate disciples, his words primarily envisage the situation of johannine Christians and, indirectly, Christians of all times, too. They are a message of consolation and peace for disciples who experience conflict and tribulation (cf 14,27-28; 16,1-4.32-33).

'In a little while you will see me' (14,19; 16,16-19): this refrain catches a central theme. It is presented as a promise of Jesus to his immediate disciples about his returning to them after death. However, it is first and foremost an assurance to the johannine community that Christ is really present among them. They 'see' him because they enjoy a communion of faith and love with him. 'I will not leave you orphans' (14,18): the johannine believers were not orphaned when they were expelled from the synagogues, since they followed a Jesus who had told them: 'My peace I leave with you. . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be fearful' (14,27). This communion of faith and love with the risen Jesus is the source of their peace, of courage, confidence, joy. Besides, it is a share in

'my peace', the peace which Christ experiences in his own communion with his Father. It is linked with that joy which he finds in loving and being loved by his Father (15,11; 17,13). In his own struggle with the forces of darkness during the passion, he, too, experienced isolation and yet he found strength in his relationship with his Father (16,32).

Peace, then, for Jesus and for his disciples is courage, confidence and joy which are anchored in a relationship of love. For the community it is a gift that comes in the awareness, in faith and trust, of the presence of the risen Lord. In general, it is the whole lifegiving relationship with Christ in which the community shares. It is their awareness of being loved and of loving as well as the joy and courage which this love awakens and sustains even in the face of conflict and tribulation (14,19.21-23; 16,20).

Community peace

This shared communion with the risen Lord is what keeps the community together and gives it inner peace to sustain it against threats from without. It is a gift which the community shares with one another, for the assurance of peace goes hand in hand with the assurance of love:

He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my Father and I will love him and manifest myself to him. . . . If a man loves me he will keep my word and my Father will love him (14,21.23; cf v 27).

A sign of that peace, which is the presence of the risen Lord among them, is the mutual love of Christians. The insistence on the *commandment* of love reflects the need of the johannine community to break down barriers of class and race among themselves and to strengthen the bonds of love in the face of conflict. As people torn away from their roots in the synagogue and socially ostracized by Jews, jewish-Christians turned to one another and to their gentile christian brothers and sisters for support in maintaining their new identity as a community, in their commitment to Christ and in their mutual love after the example of Christ. A sign of this 'peace' of Christ which sustained the community was the way they would live out their commitment to one another: 'A new commandment I give to you. . . . By this all will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another. . . . even as I have loved you' (13,34-35).

An essential aspect of the peace which the presence of the risen

Lord brings to the community of faith is the common experience of mutual love. This community love also realizes Christ's eucharistic presence and communion with them. The foot-washing at the last supper shows that remembering Jesus in the Eucharist entails the liberating service of one another (ch 13). It shows Jesus as the servant who gives his life out of love in the service of others. While the other gospels narrate the institution of the Eucharist, John describes its realization and fulfilment: the active response of the worshipping community to Christ's call to self-sacrificing love and commitment to one another. 'Do this in memory of me': Jesus's request, recorded by Luke and Paul is explained more concretely in the Fourth Gospel: 'Do you know what I have *done* for you. . . . Do as I have *done* for you. . . . Love one another as I have loved you' (13,12.15.34; cf Lk 22,19; 1 Cor 11,25). In this way Jesus links worship with community, love and service, just like the Old Testament prophets who were quite categorical in their condemnation of mere empty ritual that bore no relation to love and justice in the community. For the johannine community, the Eucharist is a call to represent Christ's sacrificial love. His death as a victim of and yet a victor over the forces of darkness, of injustice, was a concrete act in history of love and unselfishness. The Eucharist is a call to Christians to commit themselves to one another in sacrificial love. Therefore, the Eucharist is a sign of peace when the sacrificial love of Christ, which it represents, is realized in the community.

The peace of the risen Lord is a gift of Jesus to the community as a whole and it is realized in love. '*In me* you have peace' (16,33). It is very similar to the gift of unity for which Christ prays: 'that they may be one'. Just as peace is a share in that peace Jesus experiences in union with his Father, so also the unity of the johannine community consists in their oneness with Jesus and the Father. Jesus's prayer for unity expresses that the communion of believers with the Father and the Son, and their communion with one another originate from the life and the love that is shared by the Father with his Son. The resulting unified relationship of believers with Jesus and with one another is manifested concretely and perceivably in community love (17,20-23).

Peace and alienation

The gospel assures the johannine community that peace is to be found in their communion with Christ within the christian

community of love. While part of the gospel message is directed towards a community struggling for survival and inner community peace in a hostile Jewish world, it also addresses Gentile Christians who also belong to that community. For Jewish and Gentile Christians alike, the peace of Christ's presence was not to be found outside the Christian community: 'My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you' (14,27). The Johannine community recognizes Jesus as saviour of their cosmopolitan 'world' of people who are loved by the Father (3,16; 4,42). However, the frequent negative use of 'world' (cf chs 14-17), referring to the world of Jew and Gentile, shows that they viewed the world as hostile because of the conflict with the Jewish synagogue and because of Gentile unbelief.

Their world of people is divided into those who believe and those who do not believe in Christ; into those who prefer light and those who prefer darkness (3,17-21). As Christians they experience a sense of alienation from the 'world' which did not share their values as disciples of Jesus. They see themselves in opposition to the 'world' of unbelief, sharing in the destiny of Jesus himself who encountered 'hatred', unbelief and hostility (15,18-25). Their experience as strangers at odds with the 'world' finds its response in the gospel. Jesus himself is presented as a stranger from heaven; he is rejected by his own. Like Jesus they do not belong to the world of unbelief: 'They are not of the world, as I am not of the world' (17,14; cf 1,11). 'I chose you out of the world': Jesus leads them from alienation to friendship, to peace in communion with him — the kind of peace they cannot receive from the 'world' (15,15.19). Yet because Jesus is an outsider who comes 'from above' he is able to make unprecedented demands and to draw believers into a unique relationship with his Father as children of God (8,23; 1,12).

'In the world you have tribulation; but have courage, I have overcome the world' (16,33). Through his death and resurrection Jesus has prevailed over the forces of evil by the love he showed on the cross and by the new life he offers through the Spirit to those willing to commit themselves to him. Peace flows from belief in Jesus and consists of union with him. It is also victory yet it is not acquired effortlessly. It comes through growth in commitment to Christ and through victory, with his strength, over sin. The invitation to 'have courage' is very necessary since it reminds Christians of the never-ending call to choose between Jesus and the 'world' of sin and unbelief.

The mission of peace

Those sayings of the gospel which reflect the experience of alienation in a hostile 'world' have sometimes comforted inward-looking Christians inclined to view the world as a hostile arena in conflict with their own christian life. Though the johannine community had this negative experience of the 'world', they are not an inward-looking community since they experience a deep sense of mission to the world. They understand themselves as a community sent by the risen Jesus to share with others the peace they receive from their communion with him: 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so do I send you' (20,21). The peace which they experience themselves does not only accompany them as Christians on their mission to others. They have a mission of peace, that is, to draw others into a communion of life with Christ in faith and love. Just as we ourselves cannot effectively bring peace of any kind to others unless we have found inner peace for ourselves, so also the basis of the mission of the disciples is that inner community peace which they have received as a community of disciples in their communion with Christ. Their mission is not without its struggles and conflicts: 'Remember the word that I said to you: a servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word they will keep yours also' (15,19).

A dramatic conflict

Behind the deceptive calm of the Fourth Gospel we see the story of a particular community struggling with conflict and somehow at odds with their world. Yet the gospel story is also a cosmic drama larger than historical life in which Jesus emerges as victor in the struggle with the 'world'. The self-disclosure of Jesus and the response of people, which forms the central motif of the gospel, moves along progressively and dramatically from the very beginning to the 'hour' of Jesus when he passes to his Father through death and resurrection (2,4; 13,1). The tension and conflict between light and darkness reflects the life situation of the johannine community trying to live out their commitment to Christ in 'tribulation'.

In this drama the risen, victorious Jesus bestrides the stage. Even in the face of the death he promises, he is always a living Lord who offers the strength and peace of his presence to the christian community. Besides, many chapters in the gospel are dramatically structured as the dialogues, with their strong theological content, and

the action progress towards a fateful climax (chs 4,9,11,20). Many of the characters in the gospel are not simply historical figures, since they personify certain types of people encountered by Christ and the johannine community. The community could recognize their own life story of faith and their struggles played out through them. In the Beloved Disciple they could see themselves as disciples personally called and loved by Christ. In the immediate group of Jesus's disciples they would see their own community. In Judas they could see the forces of evil at work which could draw them away from Christ. In the blind man they recognized themselves being cast out of the synagogue because they confessed faith in Jesus. All these special qualities of the gospel express not only the story of Jesus but also the story of the community in a dramatic, literary form. This would have been a very suitable means of communication for Christians in a hellenistic milieu, where theatre would have been a form of entertainment frequented by all classes of society.

Today christian readers will not find it difficult to identify with this dramatic form and to see their own lives played out in the Fourth Gospel. The gospel does have a certain universal, trans-cultural and timeless appeal. It seeks to root the life of Christians solidly in the person of Christ, in a life of communion with him together, through faith and love, and to enable them to find peace in this communion and share it with others. It faces all readers with a free and personal choice between light and darkness which must affect their personal and public life. This drama continues to be lived out in the struggle for peace, in the conflict between light and darkness, between faith and unbelief. In today's world injustice and violence are among the clearest and most current expressions of atheism and unbelief. In this struggle Christians are invited to 'walk in the light', to find for themselves and for others the way to peace and victory over darkness, which is the way to 'fellowship with one another' (1 Jn 1,7).

NOTES

¹ Käsemann, E.: *The Testament of Jesus* (London, 1968), p 12.

² Minear, P.: 'The Audience of the Fourth Evangelist', in *Interpreting the Gospels*, J. L. Mays, ed. (Philadelphia, 1981), p 249.