

The Peace in the modern Anglican rite: A Sermon preached for the Benefice of Grimshoe at St James Hockwold on 6th February 2011.

*Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles;
I leave you peace, my peace I give you.
Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church
And grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom
Where you live forever and ever. Amen.
Introduction to the Peace in the modern Roman rite*

Today I'm taking this opportunity at 'Together at 10' to depart from the lectionary to address an area of liturgical concern for many of you – The Peace. Congregations either seem to love it or hate it. For some individuals it is even seen as an excuse to avoid coming to church! I suspect the Peace was introduced with other liturgical revisions without the accompaniment of effective teaching – this inevitably leads to misunderstanding and variation in liturgical practice.

I'll begin with a number of cross denominational comments on the Peace which I collected from the 'net' some of which may resonate with you:

The sign of peace invariably provokes idle chatter and hubbub with people moving around. Somehow the sense of the sacred is lost to some degree and people feel more inclined to move around and whisper or talk to their neighbours for the rest of the mass.

It is perhaps a sign of chaotic, good fellowship, but not the peace of Christ.

A new vicar wanted to pass the peace on the first Sunday in his parish. As he approached one woman she backed away. On leaving the church she did shake his hand, so he asked why she had refused to do so earlier. 'Vicar' she said, fixing him with a straight look, 'I come to Church to worship God – not to be friendly'.

[+ Stephen Cotterill]

At one service the congregation got so out of control at the kiss of peace that it took 45 minutes to get them back in the pews and resume the service...

My problem is that I'm not sure if the church has any clear idea – in Common Worship anyway- what the focal point of the Peace is...

I have to admit that the first time I attended a church where everyone erupted out of their seats and began hugging and kissing each other and wandering about at the peace I felt most uncomfortable as a newcomer with the display of emotion. It took some time to get used to that congregation's custom. What they thought was inclusive and friendly within the regular congregation was actually quite exclusive and confronting to outsiders.

Yet the Peace has a significant and profound place within the celebration of Eucharist. It's not a modern liturgical aberration. So...let's look at the history of the Peace and its true theological and liturgical function – its focal point - within the Eucharistic celebration.

The Peace, or Kiss of Peace, or 'sign' of Peace is a traditional Christian greeting dating back to Apostolic times. Indeed it was customary throughout the ancient Mediterranean world for men to greet each other with a kiss on the cheek. Jesus himself refers to this custom in Luke 7:45. However it is the references in three letters of Paul and in 1 Peter 5:14 to greeting one another 'with a holy kiss' which transformed this act from the secular to the sacred. As these Epistles would have most probably been read in the context of communal worship and since we know from 1 Corinthians that Eucharist was already being celebrated, this holy kiss may well have occupied the place it does in our modern rite – after the proclamation of the word and intercessions and before the celebration of the 'Sacred Mysteries'. From the writings of Justin Martyr in the 2nd century, it is clear that 'the Peace' occupied just that place in the Eucharistic liturgy:

When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss. [First Apology 67]

Later St Augustine spoke about the Peace in one of his Easter sermons:

'Peace be with you' is said and the Christians embrace each other with the holy kiss. ...let peace be made in your conscience, that is when your lips draw near to those of your brother, do not let your heart withdraw from his.

In his Myst Cat v 3, Cyril of Jerusalem cites this introduction to the Peace:

Embrace ye one another and let us salute each other...this kiss is the sign that our souls are united and that we banish all remembrance of injury.

Both Augustine and Cyril indicate that the exchange of peace may have been linked to the penitential rite, with reference to Jesus' words in Mt 5:23-24

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you ...go; first be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift.

However, the Kiss of Peace is not the only 'kiss' in the Eucharist. When we set it in context as one of the 'Three Kisses' in the celebration, we can begin to understand its true significance.

Stephen Cotterill, now Bishop of Chelmsford writes about the 'three kisses' in the Eucharist. He points to three loci where we acknowledge the Presence of Christ in a particular way. Many of you will notice that I kiss the altar, either at the beginning of the Eucharist or at the beginning of the Offertory - whenever I approach the altar for the first time. This kiss acknowledges that it is on the altar that Christ will be made present in the Eucharistic elements which we later receive. The second kiss is at the Gospel - you may notice when I read the Gospel I kiss the book at the end - an acknowledgement that

Word – Jesus - is present in the word. The third ‘kiss’ is at the Peace. Even though we generally shake hands rather than kiss we are acknowledging an important truth. You’ve heard me quote Mo. Theresa of Calcutta before when she spoke about the ‘little bit of God that is in each of us’. As we greet each other at the Peace, and see the Christ in each other, we acknowledge that we’re a community, constituted in and through Christ. Through this Holy Eucharist we *are* the Body of Christ, commissioned to carry Christ’s peace and reconciliation into our world. We offer Christ’s peace to each other mindful that we’re no longer worshipping as individuals but as community forged in the love and reconciling peace of Christ who sacrificed His life that we might live in Him. This is why I introduce the Peace during Ordinary time with these words:

We are the Body of Christ and His Spirit is with us.

This is the focal point of the Peace. It’s not about having a good gossip to person X or asking ‘How’r’ya bunions today’ to person Z or having a mini-PCC meeting with persons ABC – all of which I’ve encountered at the Peace – and have been guilty of doing myself! This isn’t offering Christ’s peace – it’s socialising...it may seem warm, fuzzy, friendly and desirable ...to insiders...but it misses the point and distorts the true meaning of the gesture within the context of Eucharist. Yet often we feel guilty if we don’t get to greet everyone – after all we take pride in being a ‘friendly congregation’ and shock horror Y will think I’m snubbing him if I don’t hug him or plant a nice kiss on X’s cheek!!! And who is the real focus on then, eh? It becomes more about individuals and our feelings and keeping up appearances and less about community forged in and through Christ.

When we turn to our neighbours and say Peace be with you – we’re extending that little bit of Christ in each one of us to each other and being bound more closely together as a faith community waiting expectantly to receive Christ’s Presence in the Sacred elements. Then, constituted as His

Body, we can fulfil our Baptismal calling to love and serve Him, to bring His reconciliation and peace beyond the walls of the church building.

Looked at from this perspective, the Peace isn't about forced socialising and certainly should not include undignified behaviour or chatting. This gesture is deeply significant because it prepares us for Holy Communion and our unity in Christ's mystical body. This can never be reduced to being simply a sign of mutual affection, or worse still ethnic or denominational solidarity or indeed any other human value. It is about acknowledging that little bit of Christ in everyone and acknowledging our obligation to be at peace and in communion and charity with all before we can partake of the Sacrament and together become the Body of Christ.

However rubrics for the Peace are vague in all modern traditions – even in that most prescriptive rubric culture – Rome. *Redemptionis Sacramentum* – that weighty tome of Roman rubrics devotes this tiny paragraph to the Peace:

It is appropriate that each one may give the sign of peace only to those who are nearest and in a sober manner...as regards the sign to be exchanged, the manner is to be established ...in accordance with the dispositions and customs of the people. [RS 72]

The 'Introduction to Common Worship' gives no instruction whatsoever!

Local custom. This covers a multitude. However Anglicans have long been encouraged to worship 'decently and in order'. Order and an understanding of what the Peace really means is the key. Whether we exchange a 'holy kiss', a handshake, or simply a verbal 'Peace be with you' with the persons closest to us, we are passing the peace of Christ throughout the congregation – we are united in that peace even though we may not get to hug everyone!

The explanation in the modern Roman missal of the Sign of Peace is helpful and I'll leave you with it:

The Church is a community of Christians joined by the Spirit in love. It needs to express, deepen and restore its peaceful unity before eating the one Body of the Lord and drinking from the one cup of salvation. We do this by a sign of peace.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.