

## Exchanging the Peace

*Sermon preached by Anthony Freeman at Holy Cross, Crediton, 8th August 2010*

Of all the changes in our services that have come about in the last 50 years, none has caused so much friction as “Sharing the Peace” — which seems more than a little contradictory! I gather that the topic has come up again at our own PCC Worship Committee, and at the ministers’ staff meeting Nigel suggested that one of us might like to use a Sunday sermon to outline the history and meaning of this bit of ceremonial. No-one doubted who he had in mind for this task, so here goes.

The Peace has its roots in the Old Testament greeting *Shalom aleichem* — Peace be upon you — the words with which Jesus greeted his disciples on the first Easter evening (John 20.19). It would often have been accompanied — in the Mediterranean manner — by an embrace: hence the alternative name for this action in our service: “the kiss of peace”.

It is probably this semi-formal ritual while gathered for worship that St Paul had in mind when he told the readers of no less than four of his epistles to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16.16; 1 Cor. 16.20; 2 Cor. 13.12; cf. 1 Thess. 5.26), and when St Peter said in his first epistle “greet one another with a kiss of love” (1 Peter 5.14).

Another relevant New Testament passage comes in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells his audience to be reconciled with one another before laying their gift on the altar (Matt. 5.23f). It is this association that accounts for the placing of the Peace immediately before the offertory. This is the earliest recorded position for the Peace, in descriptions of the eucharist as it was ordered in Rome in the second century (ref. Justin Martyr), in north Africa in the third century (ref. Cyprian) and in Jerusalem in the mid-fourth century (ref. Cyril of Jerusalem). But by the early fifth century, Saint Augustine makes it clear that in his north African diocese the Peace comes later, just before the communion itself:

“Then, after the consecration [...] is finished, we say the Lord’s Prayer [...] After this the ‘Peace be with you’ is said, and the Christians embrace one another with the holy kiss. This is the sign of peace” (Sermon 227).

This position just before communion is where the Peace became established in the mediaeval catholic Church, but by then it had become a brief symbolic greeting limited to the clergy. In the first English Prayer Book, in the mid-sixteenth century, Archbishop Cranmer made a typically bold step when he removed the Peace right to the end of the service and cut out altogether the element of physical greeting. Using some words of St Paul — “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds” (Phil. 4.7) — he bound up the Peace into the final Blessing. This combination of peace-and-blessing has become so ingrained that it still survives in this Common Worship service, despite the duplication involved, now that the Peace in its ceremonial form has (controversially) been restored to an earlier point in the service.

Which leads neatly into the \$64,000 question: how in practice is the Peace best to be exchanged? All that the official order of service requires is that the priest says “The peace of the Lord be always with you” and all reply “And also with you”. So here is the first answer: the Peace is exchanged purely verbally; and many of us would be happy to leave it at that. But the official order of service does allow an optional extra. The instructions say:

*These words may be added:*

Let us offer one another a sign of peace.

*All may exchange a sign of peace.*

But what is this “sign of peace” and how are “all” to exchange it? Some physical action is presumably intended, not a mere repetition of the words “Peace be with you”, but what action? This is the further question posed to churches like Holy Cross that have chosen to include this option.

The evidence I have quoted from the New Testament and the early Church, shows that the original sign of peace consisted in an embrace and a “holy kiss”. But for the staid English, a handshake is probably the most natural form of greeting, even among those who know each other well, and this too has a New Testament precedent. In a verse much treasured especially in the free churches, St Paul in one place tells his readers how the leaders of the Jerusalem Church “gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship” (Gal. 2.9). So the handshake is biblical!

Having decided upon a suitable “sign” for the Peace, we still have to ask: how can it be exchanged by “all”? At an early mid-week communion, where half a dozen is a large congregation, each of us can literally shake hands with everybody else; but in a congregation this size that is hardly possible. A relevant instruction issued in 2004 says:

“It is appropriate that each one give the sign of peace only to those who are nearest and in a sober manner. The Priest may give the sign of peace to the ministers but always remains within the sanctuary, so as not to disturb the celebration.” (*Redemptionis Sacramentum*).

That seems to me sound advice, and it is the practice I myself already followed even before reading it. Unfortunately this instruction was not issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury, or even the Bishop of Exeter, but by the Pope, so I can hardly insist that any of you should obey it.

I should also point out that when, in the 1960s, the Roman Catholic Church restored the sharing of the Peace to the laity, they kept it in its mediaeval position, immediately before communion, rather than going back, as we did, to the earlier tradition of having it just before the offertory. You can imagine the disruption caused by a *mêlée* among the faithful at the point of communion — something even less desirable than where it occurs here, at a place where there is a natural break between the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the Sacrament.

To return to the situation here at Holy Cross, I have indicated my own preferences, but what are they among so many? So as someone here in an advisory capacity, rather than one with responsibility to take decisions, I will close by pointing out just two of the things that seem to me to feed the disagreement and strong feelings aroused by this subject.

The first is temperament. Quiet introverts — whose ideal service is an 8 o’clock Prayer Book Communion or Cathedral Evensong, where you slip in at the start and slip out at the end, and nobody intrudes upon you and your devotions — such people need to work very hard to understand that for more outgoing types it is actually a positive contribution to their worship to break off and greet both friend and stranger in the Lord’s name. And the sociable need to respect their more reserved neighbours.

Secondly, problems are caused when we confuse a symbolic gesture with the thing being symbolised. In the middle of the service we are invited to share just a “sign” of peace and Christian fellowship, not to engage in the reality of the thing. There is plenty of time for that after the service.

So the task for the Worship Committee, and all of us on whose behalf they work to improve our services, is to find an appropriate symbolic way to express that Peace of God “which passeth all understanding” — some simple formal sign — that is deliberately quite distinct from the depth and breadth of the experience itself, and in which both shy and gregarious members of the congregation can share with equal ease.