

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE, SUNDAY OCTOBER 22,
2017, BY THE REVEREND HELEN GIBSON-WHITE, ASSOCIATE PRIEST**

**SEVENTEENTH SERMON IN THE SERIES ABOUT THE HOLY COMMUNION
SERVICE**

THE BLESSING

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In our series of sermons on the Holy Communion, we come now to the Blessing.

**The peace of God that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord;
And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always.**

When we had a Teddy Bears' Picnic here at St Andrew's, the children brought along their teddy bears, and I brought mine. At the end of the activities we had a service where I blessed the bears. After I had done that, a little girl said to me, "Now, I'll bless yours." Which she did in the most simple and beautiful way.

A blessing is a prayer, a desire to apply God's goodness to others, to declare God's favour upon the lives of others; a blessing is an instrument of God's love. I am sure that this was the desire of that little girl as she blessed my bear, even though she would not have been able to express her wish in words.

We often say that we are blessed when we see something good in our lives, or, maybe, when something good comes out of what had been a bad or difficult situation. We say, "What a blessing," or, "I m truly blessed."

We see God's blessing in the Old Testament, for example, in Genesis 12:1-3 ... the account of the call of Abraham to go to a land that God would show him. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," God said.

This gives us the idea that we have a responsibility in ***our*** calling, in that we are blessed so that we might be a blessing to others.

In the First Letter of Peter, chapter 3 and verse 9 is the same idea. "Do not repay evil for evil, or abuse for abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing."

In Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 5, the *Beatitudes*, "Blessed are the poor in spirit ... blessed are the pure in heart ... " and so on. Jesus speaks of a blessedness that we can experience here and now. The Beatitudes are statements of the Christian life, made possible when we know we belong to Christ. They describe the joy that is independent of the changes or chances of life, the blessing that is an instrument

God's love.

Before the blessing is given, these words are said:- "The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord"

The concept of peace has already been in our service of Holy Communion. In the *Gloria in excelsis*, - "Glory to God in the highest, and **peace to his people on earth.**" We exchange a Greeting of Peace ... "**Peace be with you,**" which is a blessing in which we bring God's peace to bear on whatever are the circumstances in which the particular person finds himself or herself. . Now, at this point in the liturgy, we say before the final blessing, "**The peace of God that passes all understanding ...**" What does that mean?

Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives." (John 14:27).

An art teacher asked the class to draw a picture illustrating peace. Most of the students drew peaceful scenes, calm seas, quiet rivers, and gentle landscapes. But one student drew a storm – wild winds, rough seas – and in the middle of it all was a bird asleep on its nest.

Peace – the peace that Jesus spoke of – is more than the absence of conflict. It is independent of circumstances. It is the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that remains in spite of the hurt and violence in the world.

Henri Nouwen, one of the most loved and inspiring spiritual guides of our time, said, "Always remember that the peace we wish and work for is not of this world. Do not let yourself be distracted by the great noises of war or the expressions of human cruelty. The media reports may make us numb, and they tend to create a feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness. " Nouwen continues, "Keep your eyes on the Prince of Peace, the one who doesn't cling to his divine power, the one who refuses to turn stones into bread, or to jump unhurt from great heights, and rule with great power. The one who says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the peace-makers.' Keep your eyes on the one who becomes poor with the poor, rejected with the rejected. He is the source of peace. Keep your eyes on him."

It is as simple as that, and at times, as difficult as that.

The story of Jesus asleep on a cushion in the midst of a storm on the lake is one of the most vivid and personal stories in the gospels (Mark 4:35ff). In spite of the fact that the disciples were professional fishermen and knew how suddenly storms could blow up on the lake, they were obviously very frightened. They woke Jesus up. "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" Jesus said to the wind and the sea, "**Peace!** Be still!" and they were.

In spite of the competence and technical ability in today's world, millions of people are saying in effect, "We are perishing." Never has there been a time when there has been so much security, surveillance and technical ability to be constantly watching,

gathering information. Like the disciples in the boat we are competent, but many are filled with anxiety, even if they are not always aware of it and do not know the inner **peace of Christ**.

The incident of the storm on the lake can be a sign of the new life that Jesus opened for us, a glimpse of what he promised if we trust him. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you."

Finally, in our Holy Communion service the priest makes the sign of the cross. It is put on our foreheads when we are baptised "to show that you are marked as Christ's own for ever." Although we can no longer see it and probably never think about it, the sign of the cross is still there and always will be.

The sign of the cross is like a badge of office, like the badges we wear to show our belonging to various groups and organisations. The sign of the cross is made at the conclusion of the blessing, and this can be a time when we recall or reaffirm that we are marked as Christ's own and that we belong to Christ. We could even say that with the sign of the cross in Holy Communion we are "re-badged" as Christ's followers.

With that confidence we are sent out from the service of Holy Communion as God's people, to serve God in the communities in which we are set.