

THE SACRAMENT OF NON-VIOLENCE

Francis of Assisi said, “Before you speak of peace, you must first have it in your heart.” And there is a lovely story about a woman bringing her daughter to Gandhi and explained to him that her daughter was in the habit of eating far more sweet food than was good for her. Please, she asked, would Gandhi speak to the girl and persuade her to give up this harmful habit? Gandhi sat for a moment in silence and then said: “Bring your daughter back in three weeks’ time, and then I will speak to her.” The mother went away as she was told and then came back after three weeks. This time Gandhi quietly took the daughter aside and in a few simple words pointed out to her the harmful effects of indulging in sweet food; he urged her to abandon the habit. Thanking Gandhi for giving her daughter such good advice the mother then said to him in a puzzled voice: “Still, I would like to know, Gandhi-Ji, why you did not just say these words to my daughter three weeks ago when I first brought her to you?” “But”, Gandhi explained in reply: “Three weeks ago I myself was still addicted to eating sweet foods.”

Yes, you cannot give what you do not have. If we claim to be peacemakers then it stands to reason that peace must first of all reign in our hearts. It seems that we have relegated visions of a peaceful kingdom to a far distant heaven and lost sight of the fact that Jesus meant for us to turn the other cheek here and now. It took Gandhi, a Hindu, to help us apply Jesus’ peace-making in very practical ways; and Martin Luther King Jr, who drawing from Gandhi’s writings, brought non-violence to the forefront of the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960’s.

Thomas Merton, who followed both Gandhi and King in their quest for bringing about peace through non-violence, recognised that non-violence was not simply a political tactic which was most useful and efficacious in liberating people from foreign rule. But in truth, the spirit of non-violence sprang from an inner realisation of spiritual unity which was already present in Gandhi and King.

It is clear from the writings, teachings and practice of Gandhi and King that they were deeply aware of the mechanisms of their inner life and so were able to produce the fruit of non-violent action. When we fail to reflect on our inner attitudes we run the risk of allowing cruel, harsh and unsympathetic judgements to arise. This often occurs when the mind judges something to be inferior and we begin to feel superior. We must recognise our constant tendency toward negating reality, resisting it, opposing it, and attacking it on the level of the mind – this is not personal, it is a universal addiction. Authentic spirituality is about allowing our heart and mind to be changed, to become aware of who we truly are. Thomas Keating said, “We are all like localised vibrations of the infinite goodness of God’s presence. So love is our very nature. Love is our first, middle and last name. Love is all, not sentimentality, but love that is self-forgetful and free of self-interest. This is marvellously exemplified in Gandhi’s life. He never tried to win anything. He just tried to show love; and that’s what ahimsa (the Hindu principle of non-violence) really means. It is not a passive thing, it means showing love tirelessly, no matter what happens. That is the meaning of ‘turning the other cheek’ (Matt 5:39). Once in a while you have to defend somebody, but it means you are always willing to suffer first for the cause – that is to say, for communion with your enemies. If you overcome your enemies (through force and violence), you have failed. If you make your enemies your partners, God has succeeded.”

I have always been drawn to the Quakers, who proclaim that: “there is the essence of God in everyone.” Quakers, the Religious Society of Friends, has since its beginning in the 17th century, had a non-violent thread running through its members that reached out to all peoples, including animals and the earth itself. Quakers do not subscribe to an official set of beliefs or doctrines, but have encouraged Friends towards open-mindedness and a deep sense of curiosity. Their meetings

are practically held in a spirit of silent waiting and contemplation and out of the silence many Friends have discovered a passion for social justice and peace, as well as an environmental concern and action.

For example, John Woolman, an American Quaker born into a culture in 1720, where slavery was common and generally accepted. As a young child he recalls throwing a stone at a robin in a tree, killing it, only to be confronted with the fact that the robin had young in its nest. John realised that those young robins now had little chance of survival due to his selfish and thoughtless actions. This experience stuck with John for the rest of his life.

By the age of twenty six John had become a successful merchant and writer of wills. But when he was asked to pen a will transferring a slave to another owner after his death, John felt unable to be part of this transaction and refused to write the will, and in so doing, persuading the customer into realising the slave. He decided to leave his business and to dedicate his life to religious service, visiting Friends' Meetings and passionately speaking out against slavery. His compassion, along with deep reflection, led John to discover the connection between riches, worldly poverty and environmental destruction, a position he reached long in advance of his contemporaries. He lived very simply and ethically, wearing undyed clothes and refusing to travel on the stagecoaches because their owners were known for their cruelty to children and horses. John died of smallpox in York and his writings continue to inspire both Quakers and many others to this day – in many, though less dramatic ways, a forerunner to Gandhi.

In his search for God and truth, Gandhi concluded that he could never hurt or kill anyone, much less remain passive in the face of injustice, imperialism and war. Instead he dedicated himself to the practice and promotion of non-violence. He proclaimed that non-violence is not only the most powerful force there is; it is the spiritual practice most neglected and most needed throughout the world. For Gandhi non-violence means avoiding injury to anything on earth, in thought word or deed. Non-violence is not just refraining from physical violence interpersonally and internationally, but refraining from the inner violence of the heart as well – even to the extent of practicing active love towards one's oppressors and enemies. Gandhi taught that God is non-violent and God's reign is a reign of non-violence. He believed that the force of non-violence was more powerful than all the nuclear weapons combined and that if we all practiced perfect active non-violence, we could unleash a spiritual explosion more powerful than the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

On the 6th August this year we mark the 75th anniversary of the U S bombing of Hiroshima. Ironically, they chose to drop the bomb on Hiroshima, killing 175,000 people on the lovely feast of the Transfiguration of Christ, when Jesus revealed to his disciples the glory of the Resurrection, which would bring about a transformation of hope, of love and a beautiful peace. Though the devastating effects and consequences of Hiroshima still live on in our world, the power of the Transfiguration of Christ has a more lasting effect and will continue to resound throughout the universe.

PS The headmistress of a girls' school asks the local vicar to give her pupils a talk on Christianity and sex. The vicar is happy to do so, but does not want to upset his prudish wife so he tells her he is giving a talk about sailing. A week later the headmistress meets the vicar's wife in the street and tells her what a good talk her husband gave. "I can't imagine it was that good," says the wife. "He's only ever done it twice. The first time he was sick, and the second time his hat blew off."