Sixth Sunday of Easter

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” “My peace I give to you.”

I have to believe that when Pope Francis wrote his encyclical on the Joy of the Gospel, these verses were very much in his mind. Knowing, experiencing the gift of peace that Jesus gives is the source, the wellspring of Christian joy.

But Jesus is clear here: He doesn’t give peace as the world gives it. In fact, this peace is really different from the common understanding of peace, namely the absence of war. Fortunately, the readings shed considerable light on this gift of peace. Let’s take a look.

All this week at weekday Mass we have been hearing about the issue in our 1st reading: how Gentiles should fit into the Christian community, which, at first, was a community of Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. So should Gentiles have to convert to Judaism first, follow all of the Mosaic law, to become Jewish Christians, like the Jewish disciples, or could there be a different path for Gentiles?

In writing about it in Acts of the Apostles, Luke wanted to put the church’s best foot forward, so he doesn’t give gory details about the arguments, nor describe a pitched battle. But he also was honest: there was “no little dissension & debate.” That could be an understatement. If you look closely, it seems like there were at least two camps, with seemingly irreconcilable, mutually exclusive positions. Of course there was tension.

But you know, reading closely, I can sense that all the players truly believed, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can find the right answer and work this out. I can also sense it wasn’t about winning or losing. It was about finding God’s will, and discovering what would be best for the Gentile brothers and sisters who wanted to follow Christ.

The world tells us peace is what we get when we win. Jesus gives us peace when we lose our need to be right, let go of our ego, and start looking to what’s best for everyone. Better yet, Jesus gives us peace when we let go of what WE think has to be, and we learn to believe and trust that God’s will is the only path to true peace. So peace is in that confidence, knowing God’s will is always mercy and love. Peace comes when God’s grace helps us to surrender, to release our future into God’s hands.

What can the reading from Revelation add? Well, for many, the book of Revelation can seem the opposite of peace. Battles and beasts, portents and plagues, death and destruction. But there is an instructive rhythm if you look at the whole book, and that rhythm hold a message for us. Woven through the disasters and terrors are ever growing glimpses of deliverance, of God’s victory, won through Christ. Brief interludes, brief ‘glimpses into heaven’ are woven into the beginning, but by the final two chapters, nothing but tremendous images of heaven, and pure peace remain.

Sometimes we can equate peace with avoiding the conflicts, avoiding suffering, avoiding the cross. That’s how the world would give peace. But as long as there is sin in the world, conflicts, suffering and the cross can’t be avoided. But does that mean we can’t experience peace? Absolutely not!
John lived in a violent world too, and his visions named and captured the roots of violence. But those graphic visions of destructive pride, greed and evil didn’t rob John of peace. We can sense an ever growing confidence. God will have the last word. God is with us through chaos, destruction or suffering. Even more, the hardships we may want so much to avoid can be a doorway to redemption. Redemptive suffering. It is central to understanding God’s grace. It requires trust, but we should never despair our lack of trust. The seeds of peace come with our first movement toward trust. Imperfect, hesitating, wavering trust puts us on the right path. A world of peace awaits as we journey deeper and deeper into trust.

And our Gospel. “If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father” It’s Jesus’ way of saying that his passion and death will lead him to the Father’s side. That’s great news for us. He opens the door to eternity for us all. Through him, we to can be with the Father. He goes on to promise: I’ll come back and be with you through the gift of the Spirit. I’ll be with you, whatever life throws at you. Abide in me, and you will taste real, unshakable peace, and true joy.

So is peace always and only a calm day and smooth sailing, when everything is going right? When we’ve managed to avoid rough waters? No!

Thank God, just as in Revelation, we are blessed with interludes of that kind of peace. Not as often as we like, but enough to let us know where we are headed, and to provide comfort and consolation along the way. Those days are a precious gift. Like those glimpses John offers us in Revelation. We should praise and thank God for each one.

But the other kind of peace is even more a cause for gratitude. I have to say, I’ve faced some real storms in my life. I know every one of us has, or will. Some of the storms are on the outside, swirling in events around us. Some on the inside, churning our guts. Storms are as inevitable in life as they are in the weather.

Being in a storm without an anchor is anything but peaceful. It’s terrifying.

But having a secure anchor, love of God, a relationship with Jesus …. It changes everything. We can experience a powerful reassurance that spending time in prayer can bring. Trust and prayer changes our experience, whether the storm is buffeting us outside, or swirling around inside.

The peace Jesus offers is truly a peace the world cannot give, and the world can’t take away.

Lord, help us truly give thanks in this Eucharist for your abiding love, and promise of peace. Help us to trust even more deeply, so that we can surrender our will to yours, and be transformed by your grace. When we struggle to trust, remind us call out for help. Help us encourage one another. May we learn not only to live in your peace, but to bring peace to others. May we move from simply offering each other a sign of peace, to offering ourselves, and being peace for one another.