



PIECES on PEACE

at the emerging from lockdown

contributed from the Retreat House Chester community

Peace

To this house;
To those who enter;
To those who dwell here;
To those who depart.

Peace

the Retreat House blessing, from above the door of
the old retreat house in Abbey Square

I was affected many years ago by hearing an explanation of the Biblical understanding of peace as "shalom" from the Hebrew word meaning: "to bring to completeness"; "to make whole". God's mission in Christ, as prophet of shalom, speaks of a totally integrated life with health of body, heart and mind, attuned to nature; open to others, in joy with God; of sharing, mutuality and love; of justice, freedom, independence, reciprocity. It is something of the vision of the shalom of God which passes all understanding, the total well-being of all humanity and the cosmos which God wills through Christ.

Shalom or peace understood in this way is not an individual emotion but applies to the whole world – the family, society, the social and the personal. It is universal and inclusive. It is a daily experience and a constant possibility, a final hope. Conversely there can be no peace whilst people within society are oppressed by poverty, injustice, racism, exploitation and idolatry. Jesus in the gospels often exposed these hidden ailments in society in order to invoke God's will for healing, reconciliation and shalom.

So the greeting and blessing, associated with Retreat House Chester, for me calls upon a deep yearning for that peace of God which passes all understanding to be established in the hearts of all who visit so that they may be resourced to enable God's shalom to become realised as they go out and participate with Christ in all that they are and do.

I'm sitting in my garden on a sunny summers day, reflecting on "peace". As I do so I'm looking at my miniature sunflowers that I planted on the same day at the beginning of lockdown (photo on next page). The difference in growth is remarkable! As I look, I start to think how they represent a lot of my thoughts, feelings and experiences over the last three months. Peace has grown as I have accepted this way of life. I have grown closer to God with so few "worldly" distractions. I have experienced the peace that Jesus offered His disciples behind closed doors (John 20v19).

But as lockdown comes to an end and society tries to find a "new normal" my peace looks and feels like the stunted sunflowers, I'm wary, fearful, apprehensive and not wanting to accept the

freedoms that are being offered to us. But the same Jesus who offered me peace behind closed doors, extends the same peace to me, as I step outside....

Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid". (John 14v27)

I suppose it's learning that the situation will always be changing but Jesus never changes and He keeps His promises.

As I start to think about going outside, I need to remember that peace is actually a person and He goes with me, wherever I go, and like the sunflowers I can choose to turn my face to the sun/Son.

the writer's garden



There isn't much from school that I can remember word-for-word, but I do remember this: '*Il faut cultiver son jardin*'. From the French story 'Candide' by eighteenth-century thinker Voltaire, this is the conclusion the hero makes after many comic mishaps involving personal and global tragedies and disasters, and roughly translates as 'We must look after the garden'.

I remember being taught that this meant that really there isn't much any of us can do about disasters, natural or of our own making; instead, we should just get on with the gardening. We can, after all, only look after our own patch, as we let the worst happen around us. In Voltaire's version of things, God wasn't much interested in any of this.

Poor Candide. He needed to know about Peace.

Peace isn't about ignoring trouble nor brought about by simple divine intervention. Peace comes when we can live life fully – which, in my book, God longs for us. Peace, I have discovered much more recently than when I was at school, is about wholeness.

The garden that we need to look after – to 'cultivate' or care for – is not just our own patch but the garden that is the world in which we all live. Fullness of life isn't just about my life, but our shared life. Fullness of life calls us on to embrace both what is already close to us and also the bigger picture. It is taking a pandemic – a word which, after all, means 'an incident for a wide people', something we share – to make us realise this. The natural world – our planet – and our shared life need our care. It's the garden in which we all live.

In some ways, we could say that this pandemic has also been a pandemic of care – a time when, widely, we learnt to care, when we discovered and uncovered this capacity and desire in our human nature. Caring for gardens, yes, and also – and more so – for people, for one another.

Let us hope we don't forget these things we've learnt. In 2015, Pope Francis wrote on the subject of Care for our Common Home, a prominent theme for him through the years. We need to pay attention. Confront, include and care for what is right in front of us and what makes the bigger picture. That way lies fullness of life for us all: Peace.

The Retreat House blessing – 'Peace to this house; to those who enter, to those who dwell here, to those who depart, Peace' – is not just about one place. It's about all of us and our common home, and our life here.
