

The setting for the Gospel reading we just heard is the upper room where Jesus gathered with his disciples to share a final sacred meal on the night before he died. Their lives together, as teacher and followers, was coming to an end. Jesus is leaving, and the disciples cannot follow. It is easy to imagine the gloomy atmosphere in the upper room, a combination of grief and uncertainty.

The disciples then, just like so many people today, were living on edge, their hearts troubled and their futures uncertain. With Jesus gone, to whom and to what could, or should they turn?

Amid this deeply emotional situation, Jesus bestowed upon the disciples, and us, his farewell gift. It is the most precious gift, the mightiest and most enduring gift, that it is possible to give to anyone, anywhere. What is this gift Jesus gives? What is the one gift that can matter more in our lives than any other gift?

It is the gift of peace. A peaceful heart and a peaceful spirit. When we are at peace, as fleeting as those moments might be, nothing else matters.

The Hebrew word in our scriptures that is used to express this ideal of peace is ‘shalom.’ Simply put, ‘shalom’ means “to be whole; to be complete.” Complete health. Complete prosperity. Complete justice. Complete faithfulness. Complete well-being in all dimensions of life and living. Shalom: the peace that Jesus gives is peace for the highest good.

Shalom can mean the ending of hostilities between rival groups or warring nations.

Shalom can also mean the restoration of a broken relationship between family members or neighbours, the return of domestic peace whereby concord and harmony replace alienation and hostility.

Shalom can also be used as a common greeting, such as “peace be with you.”

In every case, ‘shalom’ is God’s gift, a blessing.

The shalom, the peace that Jesus promised his disciples their final night together, has been likened to an inheritance of sorts. Think of it as Jesus having a last will and testament that provided for his heirs, the disciples and you and me, a gift of peace.

In our time and place, an inheritance can be a wonderful thing, but it can also become a curse. John Shea, a clergyman and author, wrote “I have been at the bedsides of dying people who have regretted they did not have more wealth to leave their heirs. They saw their contribution to the future solely in terms of the financial benefits they would leave behind. I have also been at dinners where the lucky heirs were at each others’ throats over a perceived unfair will. Inherited money is dangerous,” Shea concludes. “It is meant to help, but it can divide.”

Not so our inheritance of Jesus’ gift of peace/shalom, which is an active force certain to keep people together and never to divide them. Peace, by its nature, does not divide people but restores them to one another.

Here is a story about an inheritance that divided two brothers, and how peace/shalom is essentially about restoring human relationships. It is not a religious story as such, but I think it makes the point that at the centre of peace is the restoration of human relationships, which I also take as the central message that Jesus brought to humanity. It is a lengthy story, so bear with me.

When Thomas Mulligan retired from his thirty-year career at Sears & Roebuck in 1948, he suggested to his wife Marie that they take their 12-year-old granddaughter to Ireland to visit his older brother. Marie rolled her eyes at the suggestion and said, “Why bother? You know what your older brother

is like.” But when Thomas told his granddaughter his idea for the trip, she was delighted and asked, “Are you and grandma going back to Ireland to live?” “Why should I?” Thomas answered. “I was starving when I left there thirty years ago.”

And indeed, he had been. You see, Thomas was the second son of four sons and three daughters, and many years ago the family farm had been inherited by his older brother. That was just the way things were done. So, there was not much for Thomas to do but clear out in search of better opportunities for supporting himself. Besides, what little food there was on the family farm would go further with one less mouth to feed. As Thomas liked to tell the story, he threw his shoes over his shoulder to save the wear and tear, walked over the mountain, and got on a boat for America. That was in 1908.

In the United States he found a series of jobs as a stock boy, a wagon driver, and even a humiliating stint as a servant until a friend helped him land a job at Sears. He met and married Marie, had three children, made some money, lost most of it in the Great Depression of the 1930s, got back on his feet, and before he realized it he had reached retirement age. As Marie had said at his retirement party, “Where did all the time go, Thomas? Where did it all go?”

Over the years, Thomas had not lost touch with his older brother. Every year at Christmas Thomas wrote him a letter, usually beginning with the line, “Not much new here,” and he always slipped a cheque in with the letter. A few weeks later a return letter would arrive, usually beginning with the sentence, “Not much new here either.” The check was never mentioned.

And so it was that in the summer of 1948, Thomas, Marie, and their granddaughter boarded a ship to Ireland. When they landed, Thomas, who you will recall had departed Ireland several decades before as the impoverished second son of four sons and three daughters, rented the newest and flashiest model of Packard automobile he could find, put on his best three-piece suit, placed his large gold watch in the pocket of his vest, looked approvingly at his wife in her best hat and dress, and his granddaughter in a new outfit he had purchased for her. Thomas was on his way to see his older brother, who had been the inheritor of the family farm and the reason why Thomas had needed to start a new life for himself with only holes in his pockets so many years ago.

The farmhouse was a humble stone and thatch cottage situated well off the beaten track. Standing in the doorway to the dwelling were Thomas’s brother Michael and his wife. “Michael,” said the younger brother with his hand extended. “Thomas,” said the old brother taking it. They greeted one another, but their eyes never met.

The dinner was plain and good. The talk was general – they spoke of America, children, Ireland, the recent world war. Not much later the wives, sensing they should, said goodnight, leaving the two brothers alone in the kitchen.

After some time, Michael the older brother spoke: “So, you some kind of rich Yankee now?”

“No, I am not,” Thomas replied. “I suppose you are a prosperous landowner now.”

“I am not,” Michael said.

The tension between them was thick.

The older brother stood up, moved to the cabinet, got a large loaf of fresh bread and a breadknife, and sat down. The younger brother retrieved from his suitcase a bottle of Kentucky bourbon and returned to the kitchen. Seated at the table, the two brothers, three decades of distance separating them, proceeded to talk late into the night.

The first person out of bed the next morning was the granddaughter. She tiptoed into the empty kitchen and saw the table covered with breadcrumbs. Also on it was the almost empty bottle of bourbon. The outside door to the kitchen was open, and the granddaughter walked into the yard. The new day had just begun. The sun was climbing into the clear sky. It shimmered off the ocean in the distance and lit the land all the way up to the cottage.

In the middle of the field stood the two brothers, pipes in their mouths, inspecting the earth, finally at peace with one another. They must have stayed up all night, the granddaughter thought to herself.

The brothers turned, saw her, and waved. Then side-by-side, stride-by-stride, they walked toward her.

And the granddaughter knew that if ever she had to stay up through the long night to beat back the darkness with her love just as those long-separated brothers had done, she would be able to do it.

Peace, the restoration of relationships, is the only real inheritance.

On that night in the upper room long ago, Jesus bequeathed to the disciples their inheritance. It was the assurance that if they followed his ways, then they would experience ‘shalom’/peace. Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

We are promised, appearances often to the contrary, that by following the ways of Christ we will experience peace/shalom in our lives, especially at those times when peace has been difficult to find. With that truth in mind, I will conclude with these lines from a sign that was found inside a home for orphaned children in Calcutta. The passage is entitled “Anyway.” It is an instruction for living peacefully. For living ‘shalom.’

“People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Love them anyway.  
If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway.  
If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.  
The good you will do will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.  
Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.  
What you spend your years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.  
People really need help but may attack you if you help them. Help people anyway.  
Give the world the best you have, and you will get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you’ve got anyway.”

Shalom, everyone. **Amen.**

**6 Easter**

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