

The historians among us can give a much more informed account of the roughly 200-year time period in Roman history called the *Pax Romana*, Roman Peace. So, I ask your tolerance as I summarize it as many history books have by calling it a time of prosperity for Roman civilization. It was referred to as a “golden age” because roman imperialism increased and spread as Rome gained territory, there was said to be order, economic and political stability. It was time when new technologies appeared and art flourished. Some historians call it a miraculous time because this kind of peace is rare.

Of course, the method for achieving the peace of Rome was through political, economic, and military dominance. In other words, if you weren’t already Roman, and didn’t assimilate or change to accept the Roman culture, religion, politics, and so forth, you were punished. Another name for this time period is the *pax imperium*, or imperial peace.

For Roman citizens, this might have been a good time. But if you were one of the people who lived in a territory that Rome occupied, that peace might have felt more like oppression. People who were conquered by Rome were taxed ridiculously high, and the Roman military was nearby, to prevent rebellious uprisings through intimidation. There were plenty of uprisings, which usually were short, violent, and when they were over survivors were tortured mentally and physically. The types of technology and art that thrived were intentionally selective. It was only art that glorified Roman culture that was promoted and only technology that could benefit Rome that was celebrated. So, it wasn’t a time of creativity that thought outside the Roman box. Of course women weren’t allowed to speak in public. Those who criticized Rome were not tolerated. For them, the peace of Imperial Rome may have felt more like terror.

The purpose of this summary that is too brief to capture all nuanced perspectives historians have to offer is to remind us that this is the time period in which Jesus lived. Throughout the Gospels and Paul’s letters we get the impression that the peace and prosperity Roman citizens experienced is a far cry from the life of Jesus, his followers, and the Jewish people living under Roman occupation. The Gospel is full of complaints about the taxes imposed by Rome, the influence of the Roman government in the higher levels of leadership in Jewish religion, and the belief that the Messiah was going to be a military leader who would successfully lead a military uprising, defeat Rome, and restore their country to its rightful

leadership. That was the peace those living under Roman occupation dreamed, a peace that was not so very different from that of Rome.

This might help us understand why Jesus says all the things he said in today's Gospel about not bringing peace but a fire he wishes was already kindled. It's a confusing statement for those of us who see Jesus as the Prince of Peace, especially when he goes on to say he has come to bring division, a division so deep it will strike into the very heart of what many hold dear: the family. Today many families struggle with division and estrangement due to differing beliefs and opinions on politics, vaccinations, the war in Ukraine, abortion rights, and other current affairs. In a time as strange and difficult as this where it seems so many have forgotten how to love, the words of Jesus can feel unsympathetic to much of the suffering going on today.

That is why we need to remember the context of the time Jesus lived, the time when these words were first written, and what the author of the Gospel is telling us about Jesus. One clue to help us is the part of today's Gospel that can really make us uncomfortable, the part about family division which is actually much older than the Gospel. It goes back to the prophet Micah of the Old Testament, specifically Micah 7.6 that lists the very same divisions as part of the prophecy that the only way through the time of crisis Micah was living in was complete trust in God. In other words, Jesus was using an older prophecy to illustrate he hadn't come to give his people what they wanted, he was going to do something different, something that would cause discomfort, disappointment, and division.

Jesus was not going to bring the same kind of peace as that of the Roman Empire. We need to also remember in John's Gospel Jesus said he came to bring a peace the world cannot give. It is a different kind of peace. The peace of Jesus is not the peace that exists because of terror. The peace of Jesus is not the fire of military dominance. The peace of Jesus is the fire that cleanses, that burns away whatever harms or prevents relationship with God.

When I lived in Southern Wisconsin, one of my favorite hiking trails went through a state park with prairies and at certain times of the year, I wasn't able to hike there because the forestry department was setting a controlled fire on parts of the trail. They put up signs explaining the controlled fire was intended not to harm but to help the local prairie ecosystem. It turns out there are certain prairie plants that need the heat of fire to grow. It was also a way to rid the prairie of invasive species that can choke out native plants and can drive away native birds, animals, and insects which can be detrimental to the entire ecosystem. Over the weeks and months that followed a controlled burn in the prairie area where I hiked, I curiously observed how many plants survived the fire just fine, and were stronger, as surviving the fire triggered them to bloom. A year later that same part of the trail looked

completely different as wildflowers bloomed, birds sang, and bees and butterflies, all signs of healthy ecosystems, flourished. It was beautiful and walking there definitely gave me a sense of peace and wonder.

This is the kind of fire Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. It is the kind of fire that gives life, not destroys it, or forces it to assimilate. It's the fire Jesus kindled on the cross. Remember the cross was one of many symbols of Roman imperialism, it was a form of capital punishment for those who threatened the *Pax Romana*, Roman Peace, while at the same time warning everyone else if they wanted to stay alive, if they didn't want to suffer, they needed to stay in line. In dying on the cross Jesus shows love for humanity, for us, by suffering and dying with humanity, and does not reign over us as an overlord. Of course, that is not the end, through Jesus' resurrection new life, life more powerful than anything of Rome, can spread and bloom like the prairie after a fire.

But whether a fire is destructive or renewing, it still can feel like a crisis. And the way through a crisis, the prophets remind us, Jesus reminds us, is to trust God. Not politicians promising peace and prosperity if we fall in line. Not celebrities who promise happiness if you do your own thing without caring for how your choices or actions will impact others. Nothing we can buy can give us the peace that Jesus gives, the peace that heals, that forgives, that liberates and frees us from the oppression of sin.

That is why Jesus emphasized the importance of interpreting the time he was living in. Roman peace was not what it promised for all people who lived under it, and Jesus did not bring the same peace.

The ability to interpret the time we are living in is also important. As the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, The Most Rev. Michael Curry said in his sermon to General Convention last month we live in strange and difficult times. He took the time in his sermon to name many current events that make this time strange and difficult including the enduring covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and admitting the role of the Episcopal Church in the schools for indigenous children where thousands of young children were taken from their families, unnecessarily suffered cruel conditions and punishments for behaviors like simply speaking their native language, or rejecting the same kind of methods of assimilation used by the Rome during the *Pax Romana*, and died and whose remains are now being returned to their surviving families. This has not been an easy time for the faithful of the church as many of the church's own sins have been revealed, and it can be painful to witness these transgressions.

How are we to get through this time, and what role can the church play? In his wisdom, the Presiding Bishop reminds us to return to our roots: to Jesus, to the prophets, who remind us to trust God. Trusting God means something different than the stuff of dominance, violence and forcing our way. Trusting God means confessing our sins, which means sometimes we need to confess the sins of those who came before us, in order to recognize what happened and to name it as wrong, so hopefully it will not be repeated. Like with our indigenous siblings, many of whom have a beautiful faith and have been able to embrace Jesus and their native culture, despite the harm caused them by the church. They can be for us a voice of peace, the kind of renewing peace Jesus brings, the peace that reminds us of our connection to each other, to the earth, and to God.

Doing the work of finding the remains of the children who died in those schools and using resources to return them to their families is the holy and life-giving stuff of God's love, repentance, restoration, and breaches the distance between us. It is the antithesis of division, which ironically might cause other divisions, especially among those who disagree. But that doesn't mean it should not be done. Some things, like human dignity, healing, and love are worth more than the status quo, especially if the status quo requires denying harm that has been caused in the name of Jesus.

Perhaps in these strange and difficult times, it can be renewing to remember Jesus came not to dominate, terrify, or force his way on people, but to be with us, suffering with us, bringing not the fire of destruction, but that of renewal, dying so that resurrection life can be ours, so that when we fall into sin, when we harm each other or trust in the stuff of dominance, we can turn away from that, and turn toward God, confess our sins, receive forgiveness, and then like the life that spreads after a controlled fire in the prairie, focus on Jesus and strive to love all our neighbors as God loves us. This work takes a heart large enough to love through different and difficult opinions, a soul sensitive to the tensions that exist, and the courage to love our way through those tensions and differences. Such a heart and soul and courage might not be easy to achieve but are most definitely worth the effort because they are part of the peace so different from that of the world, they are the healing, liberating peace Jesus brings to us all.