

## Finding Inner Peace

Tomorrow, we celebrate Memorial Day when we remember those who fought and died in our nation's wars. I hope you will have an opportunity to visit one of the many blogs that list the names of the military personnel who have died in service to our country – blogs such as *Our Fallen Heroes*. Here are four who, not long ago, lost their lives in Jordan near the Syrian border, far from home and family.

- Army Specialist Quadon Chaves, age 20, of Turlock, California.
- Army Specialist Javion Sullivan, age 24, of Fort Mill, South Carolina.
- Army Staff Sergeant Alexander Conrad, age 26, of Chandler, Arizona.
- Army Staff Sergeant 1<sup>st</sup> Class James Grutjan, age 26, of Waterford, Connecticut.

There are many others, too many to name in a sermon. And there are other lists. Lists of those who have lost arms or legs. Lists of those who have lost intellectual and other life functions.

Now I am not going to debate whether any military operation was wise or necessary. These brave young men and women did not get to debate it either. They obeyed orders and responded with a sense of duty, honor, and sacrifice. They remind us that freedom is not free. There is always a price to freedom.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I think of those men and women who paid the ultimate price. But I also pray for peace – peace between Ukraine and Russia, peace between Israel and Gaza, peace between India and Pakistan, peace, world peace where there is no war anymore. Peace is the age-old cry of humanity, yet it has proven to be incredibly elusive.

When you think about it, peace includes social harmony but also inner harmony. Too many soldiers come back from the battle suffering from mental and physical disorders. They may not be fighting in war, but they are certainly not experiencing peace.

There is a case study of a Vietnam veteran by the name of Jake. When he returned home, he resumed his job as a farmer. Although he enjoyed his work, he felt constant anxiety, depression, and fear of failing. He came to his doctor complaining of stomach cramps, and then back pains. But medical tests failed to find anything physically wrong with Jake. It turned out that Jake had a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder. He was haunted by his experience in Vietnam, by the loss of his comrades, and why he survived but they did not. Finally, when the stress became too much for him, Jake committed suicide.

Ironically, Jake was a successful farmer. He was doing well financially. But, as one of Jake's sons commented sadly, "I think what Dad really needed was the assurance from someone that things were going to be okay. I think if he had that... he'd still be with us today."

What Jake needed was “the assurance from someone that things were going to be okay.” Don’t we all?

Would you agree with me that peace – inner peace – is elusive these days? Problems, great and small, are part of life. Roofs leak, cars don’t start, people get angry, feelings get hurt, we get rejected, overlooked, unappreciated. We become sick, feel tired and sometimes get victimized. All this goes with being human.

On the night before he died, Jesus was with his disciples behind closed doors for fear of their lives. There was high anxiety among those present because everyone knew they were in immanent danger of being arrested and even put to death. To calm their fears, Jesus said to them: “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 be afraid.” Jesus gave all who believe in him a legacy of peace. It comes not a moment too soon.

We all want inner peace – the peace that helps us cope with anxiety and worry and fear; the peace that gives us the strength to deal with disappointment, rejection, sickness, and death. We come to church because we need stability in our lives, we need the assurance that the future will be okay even when the ground is shaking from under us. We want something to help us sleep better at night, for something to get us through another week.

When Heather and I lived in San Diego, we sometimes would go to Coronado Island, one of the most pristine and beautiful places in California. One day, while enjoying an ice cream cone, we sat next to a woman whose husband had died the year before. The couple had carefully planned their retirement, then moved to Coronado and expected to enjoy many happy years together.

However, three years after moving to the island, her husband died and now she was alone. She was having health problems and was wondering whether she and her husband did the right thing moving so far away from their children who still lived in Chicago.

I asked if she belonged to any faith community, and she said no. She wasn’t even sure she believed in God. I then said that at least she lived in a beautiful part of California. She replied, “You know, when you are old and alone like me, it’s not fun being here anymore.”

Afterwards I said to Heather, “Having money and living in a beautiful community is not the be-all and end-all of living a happy and fulfilling life. There must be something more than a country club or beach community.”

Jesus promises us peace, but he also tells us to expect trials and tough times. The question is: “Where is the peace of God when the world around us is in turmoil?”

There is a story of a British soldier in the First World War who lost heart for the battle and deserted. Trying to reach the coast for a boat to England that night, he ended up wandering lost in the pitch-black darkness. In the darkness, he came across what he

thought was a signpost. It was so dark that he began to climb the post so that he could read it. As he reached the top of the pole, he struck a match to see and found himself looking squarely into the face of Jesus. He realized that, rather than running into a signpost, he had climbed a roadside crucifix, so common in the French countryside. Then he remembered the One who had died for him... who had endured... who had never turned back. The next morning the soldier was back in the trenches.

Maybe that's what you and I need to do in moments of distress and darkness – strike a match in the darkness and look on the face of Jesus. For Jesus is here. He comes to us to give us peace, to assure us that we are not alone, and that in him everything will be okay.

Life can be frightening, but Jesus is with us always. In all the heartaches and heartbreaks of life, Jesus never abandons us. His peace gives us the strength to face whatever trials come our way.

That's why we can experience inner peace amid all the problems and pains of life. This is not a "feel good" peace or a "wishful thinking" peace. This is an objective peace that does not depend on feelings or even circumstances. It is a peace the world cannot give or take away, because it is God's gift to every believer in Jesus.

You may know that peace, Christ's peace, in your own life. You go through a rough time and for days you feel like you are in a dark, deserted valley. You don't know which way to turn. In your pain, you cry out, "Does God care about me?" Then, here in worship, through the music, the scriptures, the sacrament, and the sermon, you say, "Yes, now I know that God loves me. God is with me. I will be able to move on in my life, because whatever happens to me, I am a child of God called to be with God forever."

When I was a young priest in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, I knew a man named Jack who unexpectedly got a diagnosis of lung cancer. Jack never smoked in his life, though he had worked as an executive in the steel mills in New York and Pennsylvania in the years before strict pollution and safety standards. The doctor said to him that the cancer had spread throughout his body and there was nothing that could be done. Then the doctor said, "Go home and get your affairs in order."

When I saw Jack the next day, he said to me, "Gary, I slept so peacefully last night. I know the end is near, but I'm ready for whatever comes next."

Whether you have Christ's peace in your heart makes a world of difference in how you live and even in how you die. Problems, pains and even death are part of life. The issue is how we manage them. Do we let them overcome us or do we overcome them in the power of Christ's peace?

I go back to Jake, that Vietnam veteran who committed suicide. I keep wondering if he had known the peace of Christ in his life, would he still be alive today?

One of the missions of the church – one of our missions – is to share Christ’s peace with others – to be a support for those who cannot support themselves. We all know people who are hurting in life, whose wounds are emotional and not just physical, and who need a friend to lean on, a listening ear, a kind word, a gentle smile, a helping hand. Maybe you can be the one to help a hurting person to find the peace of Christ.

Perhaps you have come to worship today seeking the assurance that things are going to work out in your life. Jesus gives you that assurance. “Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.”

You may think of yourself on the battlefield of life, but whatever your problems and pains, in life and in death, with Jesus everything will be okay.

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Text – John 14:23-29

Easter 6, C

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