

Deus ibi est

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

February 23, 2014

Deus ibi est. God is there.

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est. Where charity and love are, God is there.

When you harvest your fields, do not cut the grain at the edges of the fields, and do not go back to cut the heads of grain that were left. Do not go back through your vineyard to gather the grapes that were missed or to pick up the grapes that have fallen; leave them for poor people and foreigners. I am the Lord your God.

Where people create obtainable and sustaining work for poor people and immigrants, God is there.

Do not steal or cheat or lie. I am the Lord your God.

Where people are honest, fair, play by the rules, do not seek out every competitive advantage, where people keep their word, God is there.

Do not rob or take advantage of anyone. Do not hold back the wages of someone you have hired, not even for one night. I am the Lord your God.

Where people pay a living wage, God is there.

Be honest and just. Do not show favoritism. When someone is on trial for his life, speak out if your testimony can help him. I am the Lord.

Where people treat each other with equal dignity, where people ensure true justice for all, where people stand up for a neighbor in need, God is there.

Do not bear a grudge against others, but settle your differences. Do not take revenge, but love your neighbors as you love yourself. I am the Lord.

Where people do not have to get even, where people do not have to settle the score, God is there.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven.

Where people love even their enemies, where people work for peace, God is there. *Deus ibi est.*

In the fourth chapter of his *Evangelii Gaudium*, the “Gospel of Joy,” Pope Francis speaks of peace, reminding us that peace, along with joy and love, are fruits of the work of God’s Spirit in us and among us. He quotes Paul VI, saying that peace is not

simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; [rather] it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day towards the establishment of the ordered universe willed by God, with a more perfect justice among [people] ...

Peace is not a negative, the absence something -- conflict or struggle or warfare. Peace is a positive, the presence of something, something God wills -- justice, order, shalom. Happy are those who make peace, not those who negotiate a cessation in hostilities. Making peace is about building a new world, about building God’s kingdom, about incarnating -- making real -- the presence and will of God among us. Where charity and love are, God is there. Where peace is being made, God is there.

Making peace requires the day after day effort of which Francis speaks. It is an ongoing process, a calling, a way of life, not something merely called on when things go bad or when misunderstandings arise. Making peace, Francis says, is about “building a people,” a process that depends on observing four essential principles.

The first principle is this: “Time is greater than space.”

This principle, Francis writes, enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time.

It’s about taking the long view, giving it time, putting our trust in God and giving it time.

Francis adds: “Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces.” Much of what we commonly think of as peacemaking is really all about protecting spaces. Antagonists try to work out compromises that allow them each to move forward in relative freedom while protecting as much of their own turf as possible. Each side has its “non-negotiables,” the spaces, the rights, the entitlements, it refuses to concede.

But “giving priority to time” means thinking not about inviolable spaces, but about possibilities, about letting new relationships develop and grow into outcomes not yet imagined, grow into a future that is still unknown and uncertain, except that we know it will be different and that we will share it. Making peace means letting go, taking risks, trusting the process, trusting God.

Francis’ second principle: “Unity prevails over conflict.” He writes,

The message of peace is not about a negotiated settlement but rather the conviction that the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity.

Making peace is not about minimizing conflicts or homogenizing differences. It’s about recognizing the essential unity, deeper and higher than any conflict or any difference, that binds each of us to every other human being. Making peace begins with the faith that “Christ has made all things one in himself.” Peace has already been made! We are already reconciled, each of us to Christ, and in Christ to each other.

When we believe that, when we really believe it and live it, then, as Francis writes, we “are [able] to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity.” You see, not the conflict, but the person. You see not an enemy, but one whom Christ has already made a friend.

The third principle: “Realities are more important than ideas.”

Hmmm ... That’s enough to chew on right there, isn’t it, even without any further explanation. Realities are more important than ideas.

You and I can walk around filled with wonderful ideas -- “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me” ... “Be the peace you seek” ... “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” -- but unless and until wonderful ideas become hard knocks and brass tacks, they mean nothing and change nothing.

Francis writes: “This principle impels us to put the word into practice, to perform works of justice and charity.” Where charity and love are, God is there. Not rhetoric, but love, and not love in general, as a lofty ideal, a grand idea, but loving this one, the one right in front of you, helping him, standing up for her, listening to him, forgiving her.

Francis' fourth principle for building a people, for building God's kingdom, for making peace, is this: "The whole is greater than the part." "We have to broaden our horizons," he writes, "and see the greater good which will benefit us all."

Making peace is about seeing the big picture, protecting not just homeland, but the common home, this planet, all human beings share.

Making peace is about acknowledging our common destiny, our shared interest in the future.

Making peace is about being willing to sacrifice what may benefit me now, for the sake of what can benefit all of us, in God's time.

But Francis also acknowledges a vital and necessary tension between part and whole. "We work on a small scale," he writes, "in our own neighborhood, but with a larger perspective ... We need to sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil and history of our native place," while remembering that it is one precious and beautiful place among many, many precious and beautiful places, all of which are God's gift.

He likens the whole of which we are each a part, not to a sphere "where every point is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them," but to a polyhedron where all parts converge, but "each of which preserves its distinctiveness." The glory of the whole is the diversity of its parts, and the glory of each part is that it is part of the whole.

But again, to remind ourselves of the last principle, realities are more important than ideas. So when Francis says that as we build this people, there is "a place for everyone," it's not just a nice thought, a grand idea. Instead it means "there is a place [too] for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential," and "even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer." Now this is good news, indeed, because if there is room in God's kingdom for dubious people, there must be room for you and me!

But here is the truly beautiful thing. The glory of the whole is the diversity of its parts, and the glory of each part is the way it uniquely expresses and embodies the whole. Francis writes: "The genius of each people receives in its own way the entire Gospel and embodies it in expressions of prayer, fraternity, justice, struggle and celebration."

Each of us, as people and as peoples, embody the gospel, make it real, give it substance, are real incarnations of the body of Christ, in our own places, in our own ways, in our own language, in our own style, with our own distinctive, but universally recognizable, acts of charity and love. It's not just preachers and deacons, but "scholars and workers, businessmen and artists," teachers and nurses, politicians and mothers, children in school and older people in nursing homes, all of us -- all of us make peace by embodying and enculturating and living the gospel where we are. Francis writes:

The Gospel has an intrinsic principle of totality: it will always remain good news until it has been proclaimed to all people, until it has healed and strengthened every aspect of humanity, until it has brought all men and women together at table in God's kingdom. The whole is greater than the part.

Making peace is about making God present. Where charity and love are, God is there. *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.*