

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Slogans

Rev. Catherine Buchan
Sunday 13th November 2011

Psalm 123

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Do you recognise any of these sayings?

Are you thinking what we're thinking?

Britain deserves better

It's Scotland's oil

Together we can make Scotland Better

Scottish Labour, because Scotland deserves better

Labour is not working

Things can only get better

You've never had it so good (1957)

Yes we can!

Political slogans. Love them or hate them, some of them do in the end penetrate the subconscious. They are no new phenomenon either. Even the Romans had them. One of the Roman slogans is quoted by St. Paul in the passage from his letter to the Thessalonians which we read. "Pax et securitas" they would say. Peace and security. Under that slogan, the slogan of peace, wars were waged to take territory across the Greek world and beyond. Under the slogan of security people were taken from their homes and sent to work as slaves or conscripts in far-flung parts of the empire. Under the heading of Peace and Security, people lived in fear of the accusation of disturbing the peace, upsetting the perilous balance of security.

We can see this genuine fear that people lived with even in the Biblical narratives, as well as from contemporary secular texts. In Matthew and Mark's Gospels we see the Jewish leaders conspiring to kill Jesus and saying to each other "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people (Matthew 26:5, Mark 14:2). They didn't want to upset their Roman overlords. And in Acts, when the people in Ephesus are rioting because they see the teaching of Paul as a threat to their investment in the cult of Diana, they are dispersed by an official warning them that they don't want to be accused of rioting (Acts 19:40). Pax et securitas: only if you do as you are told.

We know that slogans are just slogans. They are words. They may be statements of intention, but of themselves they deliver nothing. Slogans do not give peace and do not make peace secure. But they can lull us into a lack of watchfulness. The words can run in our heads and give a sense of reassurance - if they are what we want to hear - and can sooth us into drowsiness, into not giving proper attention and evaluation to our actions.

If, for instance, we are told that our troops have been sent somewhere "to keep the peace", we may well believe it, and consequently swallow the explanation that any fatalities which follow are unavoidable, collateral damage. But are they? Recently one of the army chaplains who was with the British troops in the south of Iraq was reprimanded in an inquiry, because he did not report the abuse of Iraqis which he must have known about. Why not? we wonder. Could it be that he had been lulled into mental and moral sleep by the words, the naming, the slogans of peace-keeping? A slogan can be a dangerous thing.

Our government, and all governments, have always fought with words - fought wars, and election campaigns and for our support in general. Think about some obvious examples.

In the First World War the Germans were never known as Germans. In official releases and newspapers alike they were known as "The Hun", or maybe "The Bosche". Words can make people seem less human, more frightening.

In World War II the focus was on Hitler and his generals, and the intention was that all our enemies be seen in their light. If people had not believed that all Germans thought like that, they might have been less willing to fight.

When I was living in the USA during the first Gulf War, President Bush always referred to Saddam Hussein as Saddam. It was quite deliberate. It was saying something.

Current battles against the Taliban or Al Kaida (and the recent battling against Gadaffi) are called "The war on Terror" again a slogan, again words chosen to make the acts acceptable to a generally peaceable, but uninformed people (us).

This Remembrance Sunday, the idea is that if we remember the sacrifice of others, we will not act in such a way that others will have to make such sacrifice again. Over the years this has not proved to be true. The act of Remembrance was instituted, very much at the last minute, in 1919, planned as a one-off to mark a year from the ending of the Great War. Since then the silence has been kept, with prayers and words of remembrance, each year since. And in the years since we have seen one of the bloodiest centuries of known human history. It is good to have an act of remembrance, but it alone cannot keep us in peace. Remembering has to be more than recalling the dead if lessons are to be learned and fervent action that will lead to peace result.

There are those who say that the last people on earth to speak of peace and of working for peace are those who hold a faith, for faith is at the bottom of so much of the violence in the world, but that is only a half truth. It is not faith, but intransigence and selfishness which cause war. It is people being so wedded to their own idea and their own best interest that they cannot look to the ideas and the interests of others. Sometimes ideas of faith get entangled in that. But faith in God, faith in Christ is not license to selfishness. It is not license to consider oneself better than another; it is not license to disregard any other person's needs or interests. True faith looks outwards, not inwards, and looks to God who is the loving creator of all. True faith works with God to benefit his creation and the human beings whom he loves so much.

Lack of peace so often in the world comes when there are those who say with the ancient Psalmist -

*"We have had more than enough of contempt.
Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud."*

If our remembrance is to mean anything, achieve anything other than sadness, then these are the issues that we need to be awake to, that need to be addressed. True peace will not come while there are people who believe that it is their right to have more than another. It will not come while there are people who believe that they are inherently better than another. It will not come while human pride stalks the earth.

Words can be powerful and words can be dangerous, but words alone do not achieve what they say. That takes power and action.

As Christians we do not trust in words. We trust in action. We trust in the action of Jesus who lived among us and died for us on the cross, the victim of pax et securitas, because he was too dangerous

to have around in the Roman world. We trust in the actions of Jesus who brought wholeness and healing, and whom death itself could not hold. This is what makes us, as St. Paul says, people of the light, who should use our eyes to see what is going on, and our mouths to speak up when it is less than peaceful and compassionate.

We do not trust in words, we trust in God. We look, as the Psalm says, to the Lord our God until he has mercy on us. That keeps us humble. That keeps our perspective on ourselves and on other people in focus. Our encouragement to trust and to look with faith to God is that God has not destined us for wrath, but for salvation, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Now there's a really good motivation to keep awake. There's a really good motivation to avoid being sung to sleep by a lullaby of slogans.

God grant that this Remembrance day, in our silence and our remembering, we also remember that Christ is the Prince of Peace, whose kingdom comes, not with the empty promise of a slogan, but with power and challenge, and the ability to change hearts and minds.

Amen.