

## Epilogue I

### From ***The Truce of God*** by Rowan Williams Canterbury Press. 1983; revised 2005

*Hitherto, throughout the website, I have used bold type to indicate text quoted from the book concerned, and regular type for my compiler's comments. Here, almost all of what follows is directly quoted, and compiler's comments are reduced to a minimum. For this reason, once these introductory comments are concluded, I have put quoted text in regular type, and have indicated my very few comments by using italics.*

HP

#### **From the Compiler:**

Williams's book is about Peace – the Peace of God: 'My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...' But, says Jesus in John's Gospel: 'Not as the world gives do I give to you'. Jesus warns that God's peace is preceded by a sword and by fire. God's peace on earth is and will be costly; it will not be achieved simply by ignoring the bad stuff and hoping for the best, as Williams makes very clear.

What has this to do with the present website which is not, it would seem, about peace? Indeed, I don't think the word 'peace' occurs in any of the texts of Part I. Part I of the website is about challenging 'the powers'. But God's peace and 'the powers' stand next door to each other; the former cannot be achieved except by overcoming the latter. And our vocation in the Church is to take up the challenge even though we don't know how or when the battle will eventually be won.

At the conclusion of the chapter, Williams says: 'We are invited to live in the world of Jesus – which means bearing, as he did, the tensions of knowing the full force both of hope and of grief...' That, it seems to me, sums up very potently the vocation of his Church, of which we are the constituent members.

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### **The Truce of God** **Chapter 4 - Not as the World Gives**

When the Jesus of the fourth gospel proclaims to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you"(John 14:27), the assurance most Christians tend to hear in these words is of a peace more secure and lasting than any world can offer. But this is not precisely what is said: 'not as the world gives' suggests both that the peace in question is not the same sort as anything we habitually call peace, and that the giving itself is of a new and different order. What is offered and the way it is offered are alike a challenge to the world's peace. (p.67)

In all strands of the gospel tradition, Jesus is not a figure readily associated with peace in the sense of visible harmony. He provokes conflict and confrontation, and

says truly enough that he brings not peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34), that he comes to kindle a fire on earth (Luke 12:49)...It may be true to say that through Jesus the world can discover a fundamental unity, a community of destiny, but it would be a fatal reduction of the Gospel to say that Jesus' work is simply the revelation of universal brotherhood. As has been said so often, it is hard to understand why anyone purveying such a bland message should ever be crucified... Before human unity can mean anything, we need to see why it is not obvious – how situations have been created in which there is no community of interest and purpose between people. We need to grasp in penitence how we have co-operated in fragmenting a world called to unity. And this does not mean scraping away divisions and distinctions to find an equality 'under the skin', but committing ourselves in our diversity to the creation of new and mutually enriching patterns of interaction. If our historical actions have created a divided world, our historical actions, our choice and speech and imagination, must create a world of positive mutuality. (pp.67/68)

And this precipitates the new and grave division of which Jesus speaks so somberly – the division between the penitent and the impenitent, between those who see the world's calling to community and those content with fragmentation. The tragic impasse is that those compelled by the vision of community are driven by this vision to rupture many of the forms of communal living that they are already involved in, because the uncritical acceptance of these forms implies an acceptance of the corrupt and divisive wider structures of which they are part – or simply because these forms cannot tolerate the presence within them of a wider vision. The New Testament is haunted by the breach with the synagogue; Paul in Romans struggles to see how this destructive and bitter schism can be a stage in the creation of a wider 'peace' in God's mercy. To receive Christ's peace is to share Jesus' own position as a sign of contradiction, and to be drawn into a course of action that seems constantly to be deepening rather than healing the gulfs of misunderstanding in the human world ... (pp.68/69)

Certainly it is true that when we talk about Christ's peace we must mean some kind of share in Jesus's life or experience; but insofar as we can say anything with confidence about what sort of a man Jesus was, there seems to be little to reassure us. The gospels do not present us with a figure marked by any evident serenity – rather with someone in important respects scarred by his own divisive role and painfully aware of the costliness of what he is doing...The crisis, the dividedness, seems to run through his own person. Spiritually as well as materially, it seems that the Son of Man has no place to lay his head, but that he must carry in himself both the compulsion of his calling, the unanswerable command to be the Father's Son in all things and to force the Kingdom closer, and the cold clarity of knowing that his presence as the Son and herald of the Kingdom is for some an occasion of sin and self-destruction. Without his presence, some might have lived and died in their innocence (John 15:22)...His irony, his imagination, his anger, his despair, his many-layered and even anarchic wit, all of them stem from the struggle to make visible to all what is to him so visible that it needs no description and escapes all description; and when he cries out against the obstinate stupidity of his hearers, it is because he has exhausted the resources of language and picture to no avail in trying to communicate to people what lies in front of their noses... (pp.69/70)

This is not peace, as we see it. Jesus is a man profoundly not at home with the world and his contemporaries, and so in our terms a singularly unpeaceful person...There is no peace for him on earth, in the present order. His life is directed towards the coming Kingdom – which is an order of peace quite different from the ‘quiet life’ we may long for. Jesus’s miracles are often seen as ‘signs of the Kingdom’, clues to the fact that it is at the door; and they are miracles of freeing from bondage where the Father’s will is done by the removal of what actively damages and limits human dignity. And the recurring image of the Kingdom’s joy is the feast of the royal Messiah, the king’s banquet thrown open to paupers, cripples, rogues and vagabonds. (pp.70/71)

There is peace at the banquet not because nothing is happening but because people are reconciled, accepted sufficiently to relate to each other in love, gift and enjoyment. They are at home with each other and their host; they are at peace and they are *making* peace. But the food at the messianic feast, the supply of nourishment which makes it possible, is the love and welcome of the host...

But the price of our sitting down in harmony is the echoing discord of the crucifixion, the memory of the unpeaceful end of an unpeaceful life. Our peace is only authentic, it seems, when the world’s peace has been broken, exposed as false; when the passive consensus favoured by Caiaphas has been so upset that it brings out its latent violence against whatever disturbs it. Jesus’s peace can only happen when such a crisis has been provoked. His own uneasiness, unpeacefulness, is a kind of persistent questioning; just how much of the truth can the world bear without arming itself? Can the world, the orderly society of occupied Palestine, ‘contain’ the announcement of a final compassion which confuses all barriers of purity and probity? Can this society be a *catholic* society? (pp.71/72)

*And here, Williams invites us, in a most disturbing way, to look at the role and vocation of the Church.*

The answer is that it cannot contain such a vision. Jesus is, as Bonheffer put it, ‘edged out’ to the cross; Jesus’s followers are likewise squeezed out of their religious milieu into a new community without the familiar barriers. The Church is what is expelled by societies as they struggle with the challenge of God’s peace.

No social order is equipped to ‘contain’ this challenge; all are doomed to their varying degrees of defensiveness and dividedness, and the Church will always in our history be precipitated out. Perhaps the test of a society’s health from the Christian point of view is how well it can continue to live with and listen to (not just to tolerate) such a critical presence. For the Church, like its Lord, proclaims God’s peace best when least preoccupied with maintaining a bland consensus with society, when it is most ready to be uneasy and constructively suspicious... It gathers together round the Eucharistic table to hold together the present realities of struggle and breakage, and the hope of the Kingdom where we shall seriously, affirmingly and joyfully look each other in the face, at peace in Jerusalem. And again, we gather to recognize the way in which the struggle runs *through* us; in penitence, we look at our own refusals to be catholic, we bring to the surface our own resistance to grace. What we think of as the redeemed soul or mind or spirit is what

is precipitated, drop by drop, in these regular renewed confrontations with the defensive worldliness in each of us... (p.72)

This is where we must turn back to the figure of Jesus and ask again what 'his' peace might mean. We can recognize that the peace of his Kingdom is an active love which upsets the illusory peace of the present order; but what of Jesus's peace? He was an unpeaceful man in terms of the circumstances of his life and death, an unpeaceful man too in the sense that he evidently suffered from the constraints of his mission and its consequences. Is it only a kind of evasive or sentimental religiosity that comes to speak of peace in relation to his person – 'My peace I give you'? (p.75)

The New Testament writers are not as a rule given to religious clichés where the person of Jesus is concerned, and they do not forget the irreducible elements of conflict in the experience of Jesus. Later theology unashamedly presses the paradox: Jesus was in constant possession of the vision of God, as fully as any human being could possess it, even at the moment when his soul experienced utter dereliction. He 'saw' God as he cried, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'. In him, it appears, the two worlds could co-exist. (pp.75/76)

Jesus does not achieve a theoretical solution to the problem of how Kingdom and failure, future and present, hope and memory can be reconciled. He simply lives in both, the vividness of each, moment by moment, feeding the vividness of the other. He does so, the gospels suggest, because his life is given up, moment by moment to his Father. (pp.77/78)

When we hear 'the good news of peace', we do not comfortably relax in the confidence that a particularly tricky problem has been solved. On the contrary, we are invited to live in the world of Jesus – which means bearing, as he did, the tensions of knowing the full force both of hope and of grief....We are free to face it, not because of any reassurance that it does not matter, nor even because of any reassurance that God will make everything all right sooner or later, but because we are aware of ourselves and the whole world as objects of an infinite compassion which calls us to the same compassion and sustains us as we try to embody it. And having seen how decisively in Jesus this faith can reconstruct the patterns of human relations and the forms of corporate life, we enter on the project of compassion, trusting in its recreative power. (pp.80/81)