

2024 Proper 11B

How many years have I been praying the words of Eucharistic Prayer A? Not just the 22 years I've been a priest, but all those years before when I would say them in my head along with the celebrant...and yet this week, I heard something new in one of the lines:

"Holy and gracious Father, in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and *become subject* to evil and death, you in your mercy sent Jesus Christ..."

All these years I have heard that word "subject" as an adjective. A state in which, to quote the words of Merriam-Webster's dictionary, we have "a tendency or inclination to" or "suffer a particular liability or exposure." A kind of moral weakness which must be overcome.

But this week, I heard it differently. I heard 'subject' as a noun.

For that to make sense, I need to set the stage, so to speak.

We were discussing the passage from Ephesians, where the author is talking about the peace that Christ creates between two groups which had formerly been hostile to

one another. I have always read it as the tension in the early church between Gentiles and Jews—and rightly so, as the passage begins with references to circumcision, that ritual act that marks a man as Jewish, and was a source of contention between those who came to Christianity from a Jewish background (the circumcised) and those who came to Christianity from a Gentile background (the uncircumcised).

But as we discussed it this week, I was remembering some of my notes from one of the commentaries, which pointed out that there is something else going on here as well. The imagery of Christ bringing peace “to those who are far off and to those who are near.”

That’s a jab at the Roman Empire.

I imagine many of you have heard the term “Pax Romana”—if not from a Western Civilizations class then at least as a correct response to a Jeopardy clue. The Pax Romana was held up as an incredible achievement. A golden age of the Roman Empire, when there was, to quote an article I read, “relative peace and order, prosperous stability...and regional expansion.” One article referred to it as ‘the golden age’ of Roman imperialism, a time when there was relatively little war, lots of wealth (at least for some), expansion into Europe and northern Africa. It looks really impressive on paper.

But the truth is, that peace was achieved at the end of a sword. Both the initial conquest of all those vassal nations, including Judea, and the ongoing control to keep them in line. It was a peace maintained through scare tactics. You could leave a quiet life as long as you paid your taxes and turned a blind eye to the deep injustices built into the system. A Roman citizen could expect certain privileges and protections that came from the Pax Romana.

But if you were not a citizen, if you were one of those people in one of those vassal nations, you were a subject of the Roman Empire. No protections for you, no privileges. There is a story in Acts in which Paul is arrested and beaten, because the soldiers assume that he is a subject. But he is not; he is a Roman citizen, and as such they were breaking the law by beating him. He proves his citizenship, and they try to cover up their 'mistake' by releasing him quietly and telling him to move on. But he uses it as an opportunity to point out the underlying injustice in the Pax Romana.

He uses it as an opportunity to teach about the Peace of Christ.

Which is very—VERY—different from the Peace of Rome.

Paul models for them—and for us today—the importance of understanding ourselves *first* as children of God, members of God’s household and citizens of God’s kingdom.

Sometimes that will put them—and us—at odds with the earthly empires in which we live. Seeing the world through the lens of God’s kingdom will show us things we might rather ignore. It will show us that not everyone is treated the same. Not everyone has the same protection and privileges.

It will show us that too often, the “peace” we experience is at the expense of others. Too often, it is just a mask worn by the oppressor who gained the upper hand through violence.

Christ is offering a different kind of peace. A peace that sets aside those underlying hostilities. That doesn’t put us in competition with each other, but offers grace to all. The peace that comes only after Empire uses violence to try to silence Gospel—and fails.

But there is an edge to this lovely picture. Because the peace of Christ comes when we declare that Jesus is Lord. When we say that our ultimate allegiance is and will be to the one whose victory was, paradoxically, by succumbing to Empire’s brutal, violent “solution” to those who trouble them. By being crucified and dying

and being buried. By giving every appearance that Empire, that the power of evil and death, wins.

For three days, it seems like evil and death and sin are triumphant.

It is only after the horror that we see the power of real peace. The peace that overcomes evil and death. The power of Christ's resurrection, which transforms us from subjects of a violent system into citizens of a kingdom which rejects those hostilities and says, "We are, together, one in Christ."

Which reveals that for those who take their core identity not as Gentile or Jew, not as citizen or subject, not as Democrat or Republican, but as child of God, there is a peace that passes all understanding.

No longer subject to the power of evil and death but freed to see every person as neighbor, fellow traveler, companion on the Way of Love. To see every person as our sibling in Christ.

May it be so.

Amen.