

A life full of peace: victory of anxiety (I)

«The Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way»
(2 Thess. 3:16).

Two painters were once asked to illustrate their idea of peace. One painted a lonely lake, with calm waters and gentle mountains in the background. For this man, peace was stillness, silence, a place where nothing disturbs tranquillity. The other drew a waterfall, the water falling with force and there, hidden at the fork of a fragile birch branch, splashed by the water, a small bird with its nest. His idea of peace was a safe place in the middle of a rushing waterfall.

With which of the two paintings do you identify more? What is your concept of peace? Certainly the Lord, as a good shepherd, wants us to enjoy «green pastures and quiet waters» (Ps. 23:2), but the image of the waterfall and the bird's nest illustrates better the biblical idea of peace. **The peace of Christ is not primarily tranquillity, but security**, it is not characterized by *the absence of danger*, but by *the presence of Christ* in the turbulence of the waterfall, it is not so much an emotion as a position. The fragile but secure position of the bird in the birch's fork, even in the midst of boisterous waters, reflects the peace of Christ better than the still lake.

«In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety» (Ps. 4:8). David wrote these words in the midst of very difficult personal circumstances, perhaps the hardest time of his life. Absalom, his son, was chasing him to kill him. Could there be a tougher experience for a parent? That night, however, when he goes to bed, he says with conviction: «I am going to sleep in peace». The waterfall roared loudly, the waters threatened, but he felt safe, he had peace.

The peace of Jesus is a state of security that arises from a position -*being in-* and is expressed in a lifestyle, *«dwell in safety»*. It is not «as the world gives» (John 14:27). The peace that the world seeks is the golden pond, the absence of problems; even though it is legitimate, there is a self-centred and hedonistic touch about it.

Having peace, therefore, goes beyond being calm. If our concept of peace is only the quiet lake, eventually life's problems -the water from the waterfall- will easily drown it. The peace of Jesus, as we will see later, is much more positive, solid, and far-reaching.

Let's see in detail what the peace of Christ is like. Our reference text will be Philippians 4:4-9, one of the most encouraging and uplifting passages in the New Testament:

«Rejoice in the Lord always... Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus» (Phil. 4:4-9)

Peace has a supernatural dimension that corresponds to God. It is indeed the fruit of the Holy Spirit, but we also have to do something on our part. For this reason, the apostle uses the verb in the imperative to describe the **five steps** that we find **on the way to peace**:

- «*Rejoice in the Lord always»* (Phil. 4:4)
- «*Let your gentleness be evident to all»* (Phil. 4:5)
- «*Do not be anxious about anything»* (Phil. 4:6)
- «*Present your requests to God»* (Phil. 4:6)
- «*Whatever is true, whatever is noble... think about such things»* (Phil. 4:8)

1. Joy, the door of peace

«*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*» (Phil. 4:4).

Peace has a door: «*rejoice in the Lord always*». This entry is so important that Paul repeats it to us: «*I will say it again: Rejoice!*». The first step is like the key that opens the door for us. What an amazing entrance!

The apostle's emphasis is not accidental. Peace and joy form an inseparable whole. There are some “divine pairs” of words in the Bible: justice and peace, mercy and truth, etc. Here we have one of these divine couples: joy and peace go together. In this same order they appear as part of the fruit of the Spirit. «*Love, joy, peace...*» (Gal. 5:22).

Peace is preceded and framed by a double portion of joy. It is a joy that transcends circumstances because it is deeper than a mere feeling of gladness. Let us not forget that Paul is writing from a prison in Rome and at risk of death. As one author, Norman Wright, says, joy in life is a choice.

2. Gentleness, visible expression of peace

«*Let your gentleness be evident to all*» (Phil. 4:5).

If joy is the “door of peace”, gentleness is “the face of peace”, it is its visible expression (not the only one). Once the entrance has been passed, clothed with joy, we are in a position to start walking the path.

The second step is to cultivate gentleness. The original word is very rich in nuances and can mean *kindness, goodness, cordiality, moderation*. Peace is not only an inner state, something for me, but it is also for others, it radiates outwards. It has a relational, social dimension. If I have peace and live in peace, I treat others with gentleness, cordiality and kindness. Thus the way I treat others is an evidence of my inner peace. The same happens in reverse: treating others in a rough, harsh way is an expression of lack of peace. Gentleness is like a thermometer of our peace.

There are two aspects in the apostle's exhortation that require our attention. First, it includes everybody: «*in the eyes of everyone*» (Rom. 12:17). There can be no exceptions.

There is no merit in showing kindness towards those we like, our friends. The idea seems an echo of the words of Jesus on love, «by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another» (John 13:35).

Second, Paul is very realistic. He does not say "*be at peace with everyone...*", but «let your gentleness *be evident to everyone...*». He knew well that it is impossible to be at peace with all people. He made this idea very explicit in Romans 12:18: «If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone». We certainly need this touch of realism. It is not possible to be at peace with all men, but it is possible to show gentleness to all.

Gentleness, however, is not in fashion today. Sometimes it is even ridiculed, mocked, in a polarised world where rudeness is increasingly more valued than kindness. These are bad times for those who want to be gentle. If you strive to be a kind, caring, moderate person you can be accused of "being weak". We as Christians are called to swim upstream once more.

Kindness, goodness, gentleness make up *a profound sense of Christian courtesy* that is an expression of maturity and strength, holiness and godliness. This divine courtesy moulded in us by the Holy Spirit is so important that it is one of the requirements of church leaders (the elder must be "gentle", 1 Tim. 3:3) as well as of all believers (1 Pet. 3:4).

Therefore, **the first obstacle** to peace is the absence of gentleness, the rudeness expressed in **a spirit of permanent conflict**. The life of Jesus shows us kindness, goodness, gentleness, meekness. His occasional controversies and apparent harshness with scribes and Pharisees were justified, even necessary. There is a time and a moment for controversy, but this is not our character or our way of life. The believer is called to be an agent of peace because God is a God of peace. Our most genuine DNA leads us to gentleness, not to conflict, to «live in peace with everyone» (Heb. 12:14). Yes, a life full of peace radiates gentleness, kindness, goodness, courtesy.

3. The anxiety that puts out peace

«*Do not be anxious about anything*» (Phil. 4:6).

Paul gives us the third step to peace in a negative way, something to avoid. Anxiety is a great obstacle on the way to inner peace, that's why the apostle uses again an absolute term: «about anything».

We need to understand well what it means "to be anxious" otherwise it can generate confusion and feelings of guilt. Not a few believers are overwhelmed because they confuse "being anxious" with "fretting". Let's see the difference.

Being anxious is *a reaction*, it arises automatically as a natural reflex and it is part of our personality make up, mainly related to temperament. It has a certain genetic basis. We will call it **temperamental anxiety** or anxious personality. People with this problem are fully aware of it, they regret it and would like to react in a different way.

They fight against their anxiety. Their trust is in the Lord, but they cannot avoid these spontaneous reactions of fear and apprehensive anticipation. God is not offended by this type of anxiety; He understands it and does not rebuke us for having an anxious character.

The psalmist himself exclaims: «When I am afraid, I put my trust in you» (Ps. 56:3). Anxiety and confidence co-exist in the psalmist's heart. There is a kind of natural fear that even helps us to better face dangers. Obviously being anxious is not a spiritual problem and, in itself, it is not a sin.

Fretting, on the contrary, is not a reaction, it is *an attitude*, it does not arise so much from our genes (temperament) as from our heart. We will call it **existential anxiety** or vital anxiety. It is an attitude of being very worried, overwhelmed to the point of disquietude and being troubled. It is the fear that life's essentials like food, health or clothing will be missing or fail as Jesus warned: «Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink...» (Matt. 6:25-34).

Unlike the anxious character, it can become a sin because it contains a seed of mistrust. If this seed grows, it makes God small. It is the lack of confidence that the people of Israel showed in the desert, an attitude that greatly irritated not only Moses but God on several occasions. The people forgot the faithfulness of God in the past. This spiritual amnesia is a sin because it leads to complaint and turns the Almighty God into a "pocket-God". They did not heed God's wise counsel: «Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding» (Prov. 3:5).

This confidence «*with all your heart*» is expressed in three ways. We'll call it **the triple "p" of trust**:

- Trust in God's **providence**: God sees.
- Trust in God's **provision**: God provides.
- And trust in God's **protection**: God keeps me.

Dr. Pablo Martínez

Dr. Pablo Martínez is a psychiatrist and he currently works at a private practice in Barcelona. He develops a valued ministry as lecturer and teacher in many European countries on topics like "Mind and faith", "The therapeutic value of the Gospel in emotional problems" or "Taking care of yourself". His books dealing with such issues have been translated into 16 languages. He teaches Pastoral Theology and his ministry as a Bible teacher is also very appreciated. He is honorary president of the Grupos Bíblicos Universitarios (GBU - IFES).

The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martinez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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