

## Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter: John 14:23-31

In 1873, Horatio G. Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman living in Chicago. He was married to Anna with four daughters. On 21<sup>st</sup> November of that year, Anna and all four of their daughters were crossing the Atlantic from America to Europe on the French ocean liner, Ville du Havre, along with 308 other passengers. Although Mr. Spafford had planned to go with his family, he found it necessary to stay in Chicago to help solve an unexpected business problem. He told his wife he would take another ship and join her and their children in Europe a few days later.

About four days into the crossing of the Atlantic, the Ville du Havre collided with a powerful, iron-hulled Scottish ship, the Loch Earn. Within approximately 12 minutes, the Ville du Havre had sunk, carrying with it 226 of the passengers including the four Spafford children. Anna survived, rescued by a small rowing boat, then by another large vessel which, nine days later, landed them in Cardiff. From there she wired her husband a message which began, "Saved alone, what shall I do?"

Mr. Spafford booked passage on the next available ship and left to join his grieving wife. Four days into the crossing, the ship's captain called Spafford to his cabin and told him they were over the place where his children went down. After Spafford had spent time on the deck in mourning and prayer, he returned to cabin and over the next few days wrote what would become one of the most loved hymns of all time, which begins:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say: it is well, it is well with my soul.*

Listening to that story, it might be incomprehensible to some of us how Horatio Spafford could possibly have written those words. How does someone lose all four of their children in a terrible accident and write: 'whatever my lot, it is well with my soul'? There is no reasonable explanation, except for the words which Jesus shares with his disciples in today's passage: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'

It's that last bit that really matters here: 'I do not give to you as the world gives.' Elsewhere, in the book of Philippians, St Paul describes this as the 'peace that transcends understanding.' **Peace as divine gift.** Peace that we cannot manufacture or rationalise, but only ask for and receive.

How the disciples needed that gift as Jesus talked to them in the upper room on the night before he died! Their leader and best friend was about to leave them and, though he promised to return, he did not say when that would happen. Come to think of it, how Jesus needed that gift, too – we often miss the fact that Jesus himself is the primary recipient of his own teaching, and, as he awaits the horrors that he knows will come his way over the next 24 hours, he is no doubt troubled and afraid. When he teaches the disciples in this passage, and encourages *them* not to be troubled or afraid, he speaks of what he knows.

As we look at an increasingly broken world around us, there are so many reasons to be un-peaceful. There will be personal reasons, as well as bigger threats over which we have no control. Many of us may feel that our sorrows sweep over us like the billows of the sea. Of necessity, it is in the hardest of times that peace is most needed. But I believe that **it's not only for the tough times that we should pray for this divine gift of peace**, and I think this is what the theology of that first verse of Spafford's hymn teaches us. Spafford has learnt to trust God and receive his peace in the good times as well as the bad: *whatever* my lot, he sings, it is well with my soul.

And note that **this is something he has learned: 'whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say.'** Retaining God's perspective on our lives is something Spafford has practised over many years; the great value of this is that he can now receive it and live it just when he needs it most.

Divine peace is not just something that magically happens: it is linked to the depth of our relationship with God, to how much we know his ways: that's why Jesus' lovely promise in v27 is immediately preceded by an equally important verse: 'the Holy Spirit,' Jesus says, 'whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you.'

At the heart of following Jesus lies a set of great truths: **how much we flourish in our faith is directly linked to how much we, not just know, but internalise those truths**, so that they reflect our day-to-day lived experience. It's one thing to know God loves us in our heads, but another to live as those who *know in their hearts* that they are deeply loved. That's where the Holy Spirit comes in: the Spirit writes these truths on our hearts. Jesus calls the Spirit 'the Advocate', or encourager, speaking those words direct into our souls just when we need them.

As I close, a simple tip. As you try to live out your faith each day, **try to notice those times when some encouragement or biblical truth pops into your mind**. We so often dismiss this kind of thing as coincidence: but not according to Jesus. The Holy Spirit reminds us of truth when we need it. So don't miss these little golden nuggets: treasure them!

And why not pray in faith for God to reveal these golden nuggets just when you need them – today, this week, and from now on. The Holy Spirit teaches us all things, and reminds us what Jesus says. And as he does that, so we can know a peace that is not of this world.

Whatever our lot, may God grant us grace to say this day: It is well, it is well with my soul.' Amen.