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# Biblical Understanding of Peace

**Selva Rathinam, SJ**

*President, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune*

**Abstract:** Peace is different for different people from different contexts. The Bible also has a vision of peace! What is it? Peace is wholeness. In the OT it refers both to secular and religious wholeness, secular in its individual and communal spheres and religious which is the result of righteousness, covenant, blessing and salvation. Peace in the NT is the gift of Christ which is described as the Peace of God which refers to three basic aspects: secular which is the cessation of war or strife, restored relationship between God and humans through faith and finally peace of mind coming as the fruit of the Spirit which is the 'indwelling presence of the risen Lord.' Then, the author speaks about two metaphors of Peace: peace as reconciliation which emphasizes our human effort to make peace on account of what Jesus has done and this begins with our sensitivity towards the weaker section; and peace as Kingdom of God which is a political and cosmic community based on justice and God's love. Thus, peace is both a gift and a task.

**Keywords:** Peace, Bible, Peace as wholeness, Covenant, New Testament, Old Testament

## Introduction

What you see depends upon where you stand. What is peace? It is different for different people depending upon where they stand. Since there are different views on what peace is I would like to list some general notions of peace by

relating some recent incidents in our country. In 2011 Anna Hazare started an Indian anti-corruption<sup>1</sup> movement which was a series of demonstrations and protests across the country to establish strong legislation and enforcement against an endemic political corruption. His hunger strike at the Jantar Mantar in Delhi raised the awareness of the common people on corruption in the Indian government. Peace for the people was identified with corruption-free India. Corruption became the 'waterloo' for the ruling Congress party. BJP came to power in 2014. Now India has seen a near 25% increase in incidents of communal violence in the first five months of 2015 under the BJP government, compared to the corresponding period of the previous year when the Congress-led government was in power.<sup>2</sup> Now for people peace is identified with communal harmony! On 28 September 2015 a mob of people attacked a Muslim family in Bisara village near Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, killing Mohammad Akhlaq Saifi and seriously injuring his son on rumours of beef-eating. This incident is called 2015 Dadri mob lynching. Commenting on this BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj said that Hindus consider cow as their mother and one who attacks the mother gets killed in the process. After Dadri lynching episode, on 20 October 2015 in a gruesome incident of caste violence, two Dalit minors were burnt to death by people belonging to an upper caste in Sunped village of Faridabad, Chandigarh. Commenting on this incident the Union Minister V K Singh said that the Centre cannot be blamed if somebody throws a stone at a dog! In an earlier incident of 16 December 2012 in Munrika, a neighbourhood in South Delhi a 23-year-old female physiotherapy intern, Nirbhaya (Jyoti Singh Pandey) was beaten and gang raped in a private bus in which she was travelling with a male friend. In two week's time she died from her injuries. This generated widespread national and international coverage and was widely condemned. Here peace was considered to be giving dignity to every human person whether male or female, Brahmana

or Shudra. Farmer suicides in India are widespread. As many as 628 farmer suicides have been reported so far in the year 2015 in Maharashtra which has experienced the most deficient rainfall in the entire country.<sup>3</sup> Here freedom from poverty is identified as peace.

All the above incidents show how different people view peace from different contexts and try to pursue it. Are all these views correct and keep in line with the biblical vision of peace? In order to seek genuine peace and pursue it we need to know what the biblical vision of peace is.

## **I. Peace as Wholeness**

*Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace.<sup>4</sup> It occurs in the OT 250 times! *Eirene* is the Greek word for ‘peace,’ which occurs 100 times in the NT. *Shalom* is translated as wholeness, well-being, peace, prosperity, salvation and even ‘justice.’ *Shalom* also designates innocence from moral wrongdoing (Gen 44:17; 2 Kgs 5:19). *Shalom* is indeed a gift, but its maintenance in human life depends upon human response to the divine moral order for human society. These moral values include justice and righteousness. Hebrew and Greek words for justice in both Testaments occur 1000 times. This shows how enormously important justice is in Scripture.

## **A. Peace in the Old Testament**

Peace is wholeness and it refers both to secular and religious categories.

### **1. Secular Peace**

Secular peace is wholeness of men and women in their individual and communal spheres.

(i) **At the individual level** it involves health (Is 38:17) and good life which is synonymous with a good sleep (Ps 4:8), longevity (Prov 3:2), posterity (Ps 37:37) and tranquil death

(Gen 15:15).

(ii) **At the communal level**, the peace involves the prosperity and security of the family or the nation. This ‘prosperity’ often refers to economic prosperity (Pss 37:11; 147:14; Is 54:13; 66:12; Zech 8:12) although in some passages it refers to a state wherein society and nature are harmoniously joined in covenant (Lev 26:6; Job 5:23-24; Ezek 34:25; cf. Ps 72:3; Hos 2:18; 4:1-3). By ‘security’, peace often refers to political security (2 Kgs 20:19; Is 32:18; Hag 2:9) which may often mean the absence of war (Judg 21:13; 1 Sam 16:4-5; 29:7; 1 Kgs 2:5; Jer 14:13; 28:9) or the ending of war through a treaty or agreement of nonviolence (Dt 2:26; 20:10-12; Josh 10:1; 11:19; Is 36:16; Dan 11:6) although sometimes it refers to military victory (Judg 8:9; 2 Sam 19:24, 30; 1 Kgs 22:27-28; Jer 43:12; Mic 5:5). Isaiah’s “Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6) seems to denote a victorious prince.

Thus, peace can be personal and social. Personal peace is inner tranquility resulting from cessation of conflicts. It is in such peace, St. Ignatius claims that God speaks to us. Social peace refers to economic prosperity which results from the absence of corruption and injustice; and political security which results from the absence of war. St. Augustine defended the doctrine of just war on the ground of a just cause like the defense of the state against the outside enemy. St. Aquinas refined it saying that although the just war can be waged on a just cause, the intention of the ruler who orders it should have a right intention. Now when nuclear weapons threaten to wipe off the face of the earth, even this just war has to be revisited. The documents of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Pacem in Terris* speak eloquently on this.

## **2. Religious Peace**

All peace is of God (Is 45:7) and the condition of peace is the presence of God (Num 6:26; 1 Chr 23:25). It is therefore

man's righteousness under the covenant which makes him peaceable.

(i) **Peace and righteousness:** Peace and righteousness are often combined (cf. Pss 72:7; 85:10; Is 48:18; 57:2; 60:17). The effect of righteousness will be peace (Is 32:17). Since to be at peace is to be upright (Mal 2:6) the antithesis of peace is wickedness (Ps 34:14; Prov 10:10; Is 48:22). Thus, the wholeness of man's life includes his obedience to God.

(ii) **Peace and covenant:** Peace is central to all three Monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three faiths emphasize their special covenant with God, for Judaism through Moses, Christianity through Jesus, and Islam through Muhammad. The book of Ezekiel speaks about the covenant of peace (Ezek 37:26). Covenant is the relationship which restores man to wholeness of relationship with God which brings man the love of God (Is 44:10). For Yahweh to remove his peace is for him to abrogate the covenant (Jer 16:5). This covenant of peace involves a mutuality of relationship (which is absent in Islam 'submission').<sup>5</sup>

(iii) **Peace and blessing:** The blessing is Yahweh's gift to the wholeness of relationship. It could mean strength (Ps 29:11), pardon for sin (2 Kgs 5:19), joy (Is 55:12), assurance of an answer to prayer (Gen 41:16).

(iv) **Peace and salvation:** Because God rules over humanity his peace is salvation (Is 52:7). Thus, those who trust him can hope for salvation (Ps 119), have peace. Though judgment and trouble may precede the actuality of eschatological peace, Israel knows that her suffering is the "chastisement of our peace" (Is 53:5).

## **B. Peace in the New Testament**

**1. Peace of God:** While in classical Greek it means the absence of hostilities between rival groups, in the NT it takes

on a new meaning partly because of the influence of the Hebrew word ‘*shalom*,’ and partly because of its usage in the context of Christian faith and experience. In a conventional salutation on meeting or parting, the Hebrew word came to be used. Although such greeting is found on the lips of Jesus when he says “Go in peace” (Mk 5:34; Lk 7:50) or “Peace be with you” (Jn 20:19, 21), it was much more than a mere salutation. With the word of peace went the actual bestowal of peace, and if this proffered gift was spurned, the peace returned to him who had offered it (Mt 10:13; Lk 10:5-6). Paul uses such greeting at the beginning of his letters and others follow his example (1 Pet 1:2; 2 Jn 3; Jude 2; Rev 1:4). “Peace” in these greetings is described as the “Peace of God” (Phil 4:7; Col 3:15) as it is considered to be coming from God and as the gift of Christ (Jn 14:27).

**2. Distinctive meaning of Peace in the NT:** There are three precise meanings of peace which can be distinguished from the NT.

**(i) Peace in a secular sense**

As in classical Greek it refers to peace as opposed to war or strife (Lk 14:32; Act 12:20). In Eph 2:14-17 Christ brings reconciliation between Jews and gentiles who were normally antagonistic to each other. In 1 Cor 7:15 it is ‘domestic peace’ between husband and wife (see Mt 10:34; Lk 12:51). Jesus speaks his blessings upon the “peacemakers” (Mt 5:9). In 1 Cor 14:33 it refers to orderliness in contrast to confusion in the conduct of Church meetings.

**(ii) Restored relationship between God and man**

Before his conversion man is ‘alienated’ from God (Eph 4:18; an enemy of God in Rom 5:10). In Christ this wrong relationship is set right (2 Cor 5:19; Col 1:22) and justified by faith (Rom 5:1). This is peace with God through Jesus Christ (Eph 2:15) himself is called “our peace” (Eph 2:14).

### (iii) **Peace of mind**

Mind of the Spirit as the life and peace in Rom 8:6. In Rom 15:13 joy and peace is blessing. In Gal 5:22 “peace” as one of the fruits of the Spirit. At Phil 4:7 we read that “the peace of God...will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. In Col 3:15 “the peace of Christ” is to “rule in your hearts.” The actual mention of heart and mind as the sphere where peace rules points to this same meaning. In Jn 14:27 the gift of peace is offered in contrast to the troubled hearts of the disciples. It is nothing but the ‘indwelling presence of the risen Lord’ or the joy of the Resurrection (see Jn 20:11-18).

Therefore when one wished for another ‘peace from Christ’ it is used to embrace all three. In fact the peace which Jesus promises is more than freedom from fear and it is the presence of the risen Jesus within us and in the midst of us. When his kingdom that of above (Is 9:6-7; Ezek 37:26) penetrates the kingdom that is below, then, a contrast community, an alternative society becomes a reality.

## **II. Metaphors of Peace**

### **A. *Peace as Reconciliation***

If we do not work for peace in this highly developed age of science both humanity and nature will be destroyed. Karl Friedrich von Weizacker said that “peace is a very important condition for our lives in the age of scientific technology.”<sup>6</sup> That is why Jesus said, “Happy are those who work for peace” (Mt 5:9). “Those who work for peace” in Greek is *eirenopoioi* which means “make peace” and therefore it implies that peace cannot be achieved without our effort.<sup>7</sup>

In Ephesians 2:11-22 peace is explained as reconciliation with God, reconciliation among the humans and reconciliation with nature (Rom 8:19-23).<sup>8</sup> All these three are possible on account of what Jesus has done. Although there is no change

in the attitude of God who is always loving and in the attitude of the sinner who is always rebellious, there is change in the situation on account of what Jesus has done on the cross. The uncovenanted gentiles established covenant (relationship) with God through the blood of Jesus who made laws impotent through his body. Such abundant love of Jesus restored our original 'image' at the time of creation. This restoration brought about a new human community which broke down the wall of enmity among the humans. This is made possible through the love which Christ showed on the cross. This new community is the manifestation of God's family with Christ as the centre and this grows until the whole universe becomes God's temple where God lives and rules.<sup>9</sup> The people belonging to this God's family spread peace far and wide (Lk 10:10-12). Paul uses one compound verb, *anakephalaaiosasthai*, to express the idea of unity in diversity. "This one word is the key to the whole message of Ephesians. The first part *ana*, means to "sum up again," and the main verb, *kephalaioo*, the stem of which is *kephale*, means "head." So the meaning of this verb is that all things become one under Christ."<sup>10</sup>

It was this reconciliation and harmony we see in the story of creation (Gen 1:31). According to the Korean minjung theologian, Ahn Nyung-Mu, the "fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil" is something that belongs to everyone and by making it a private property the human has disobeyed God's command, which alienates the humans from God breaking God's peace.<sup>11</sup> This resulted in alienation with oneself and alienation with others in the Garden of Eden. This initial alienation snowballed into Cain killing Abel and Lamech boasting about his sin (Gen 4:23-24). Thus, alienation with God brings division after division in the world disrupting peace. In Gen 4:22 Lamech's son Tubal Cain made all kinds of tools from bronze and iron and it may be because of Lamech's confidence in weapons to avenge his enemies reminding us of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. today, both competing for power



through the number of weapons.<sup>12</sup> But peace can come not through the weapons of mass destruction (Pss 33:16-17; 44:6-7; 46:8-9) but through the tools of mass production as in Micah 4:3 “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” Thus, peace is reconciliation/harmony and the opposite of peace is division. Here the other is not looked at as the other but as an indispensable partner<sup>13</sup> (Is 11:6-9) where the basis of the harmony is the experience of God’s love.

“Peace in the biblical sense is different from the peace (*pax*) which the Romans used in the political context” (*pax Romana*).<sup>14</sup> The biblical peace is peace with justice as the psalmist says, “steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other” (Ps 85:10) and “righteousness will go before the Lord and prepare for him a path of peace” (85:13). The eighth century pre-exilic prophets emphasized the need of justice for peace (Is 1:17; Am 5:24; Mi 6:8). The God of Exodus is the God who listens to the cry of the people (Ex 3:8; Ps 72:12). This God expected justice based on love (Ex 22:21-22). The Old Testament word for God’s love is *rahamim* which means womb translated as compassion. “Phyllis Trible, in her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, says that the womb is the vessel and its contents is love. Woman who contain life in their bodies, and who care for this life, are more sensitive to God’s love. Furthermore, from the sociobiographic perspective, women who have suffered oppression and discrimination down through the years are more sensitive to the pain of the oppressed. Those who trample upon others are unable to feel the pain of those on whom they are trampling.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, any exploited group will feel the pain of the suffering people. “If we want to see the corruption and injustice in the society we have to learn about and feel the suffering of those who are exploited.... If we ignore their cries and do nothing to solve the problems that cause their suffering, claiming that we have peace, we are

fooling ourselves. That is not peace, but only *pax Romana*. In Isaiah 11 we read about the fierce lion and the poisonous snakes playing together with children. There we can see equality and partnership. This is the vision of the world that we should try to achieve.”<sup>16</sup>

### ***B. Peace as Kingdom of God***

“Shalom is a political [and even cosmic] community based on justice”<sup>17</sup> (Jer 7:5-7; Mic 2:1-12; Amos 4:1 and Ps 34:14). God in the Old Testament comes across as the “relative” (goel) of the widow, the orphans, the aliens and the poor and avenger of Israel. Such agreement is made through the covenant with God’s people and this covenant is a relationship based on justice. For prophets like Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah to know God is to do justice (Amos 5:4-15; Jer 22:13-16; Is 1:17). Justice in the Bible is not abstract but looking at the structure of political and social relationship from the perspective of the poor and the weak.<sup>18</sup> “In recent years we have become concerned about eco-justice, i.e., the just way in which we use natural resources and environment. Here too, how can we allow a section of society to consume a majority of resources when many have no access to it.”<sup>19</sup> When personal and corporate responsibilities are there to build up a just society shalom will be experienced and a hindrance to such peace is selfishness (Is 57:17-21) expressed through our lifestyle, attitude and irrational prejudices against others.<sup>20</sup> Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the same as that of shalom in the Old Testament.<sup>21</sup> His manifesto (Lk 4:16-21), Beatitudes (Lk 6:20-22) and credentials (Mt 11:2-5) revealed the perspective in which he looked at the society. His values expressed through his reaction to cult (Mt 5:23-24), law (Mk 2:27) and ritual (Mk 7:15) are the values of the Kingdom of God. His solidarity with the marginalized made him the enemy of the powerful who possessed unjust values and took him to the cross. Thus, “conflict was very much part of Jesus’ ministry

of Shalom. That seems to be the experience of people who follow Jesus. They are at odds with the inhuman and unjust values and structures of dominant society. Jesus was able to bear up the conflict not by retreating himself into a spirituality that is preoccupied with his own security (Gethsemane) but by committing himself to God who is present in the midst of his people for their liberation. In this sense Jesus knew that peace is the gift of God. It is also a task.”<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:4-30 describes the church as a body, an organism of which Christ is the head and all Christians are parts. If the body is to be whole it needs all parts. In the same way we all need one another. Since the gifts of the spirit are distributed to all parts of the body, wholeness in Christ is primarily a communal and not individual.<sup>23</sup> “Paul’s point is that none of us has all the gifts which are necessary for the church to function as a community faith in mission. We all have some of the gifts. We all need one another. Only as we live, work and worship together is the church whole, fully equipped for the life of faith and mission. Christ our peace takes on a new meaning—Christ brings us together, whoever we are, and enables us to work together. As we work and worship together, we all find wholeness.”<sup>24</sup> For people like Micah and Isaiah the city of Jerusalem was a geographical centre for peace (Mi 4:1-4) from where the instruction for peace will come.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Jerusalem means the foundation or the city of peace. But such hope was dashed by Micah himself when he said, “Zion shall be ploughed like a field, and Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins” (Mi 3:12). Jesus himself wept over Jerusalem and said that it did not know the things that make for peace (19:41-44). We need for firmer foundation for peace. Peace is based no longer on a place but on a person, that is Jesus Christ (Jn 4:21-24) “upon whose sacrifice on the cross, in the giving up of his life, the shedding of his blood, lie the seeds of shalom... To

have this realization is the beginning of the discovery of the path God wants us to walk in this life.”<sup>26</sup>

## Notes

1. Corruption may be understood as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.
2. See Aman Sharma, “Communal Violence in the Country up by 25% in first five months of 2015,” in *The Economic Times*, July 21, 2015.
3. Priyanka Kakodkar, “628 farmer suicides in Maharashtra this year,” *The Times of India*, Mumbai, Sep. 5, 2015.
4. Here I basically follow E.M. Good, “Peace” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993, pp. 704-706.
5. Peace is central to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is shown in their greetings of Peace meant primarily to members of one’s own community: *shalom aleichem*, *pax vobiscum* and *salaam aleikum*. Peace in Arabic is salaam which is the root for Islam (surrender or submission) and Muslim (one who submits) and therefore stereotyping Muslims as angry mob is wrong and most Muslims are peace loving people. See <http://www.answering-islam.org/Authors/Sene/peacepromoting.html> accessed on 22/10/2015 where it is explained that for Muslims Allah is great and unknowable and therefore Muslims are slaves of Allah and ‘peace’ for them is to surrender themselves to the Will of God and not through establishing personal relationship with God which is not possible.
6. See Lee Oo Chung, “Peace is Harmony: Peace, Unification and Women,” in S.T. Martinez (ed.), *Christ our Peace: Building a Just Society* (Japan 1990), 59.
7. See Lee Oo Chung, “Peace is Harmony,” 59.
8. See Lee Oo Chung, “Peace is Harmony,” 60.
9. See Lee Oo Chung, “Peace is Harmony,” 60.
10. See Lee Oo Chung, “Peace is Harmony,” 63.
11. See Lee Oo Chung, “Peace is Harmony,” 61.

12. See Lee Oo Chung, "Peace is Harmony," 62.
13. See Lee Oo Chung, "Peace is Harmony," 64.
14. See Lee Oo Chung, "Peace is Harmony," 64. *Pax Romana* is an enforced peace. Anyone who tried to protest the violence of the Roman military governors was punished ruthlessly.
15. See Lee Oo Chung, "Peace is Harmony," 65.
16. See Lee Oo Chung, "Peace is Harmony," 66.
17. K.C. Abraham, "No Peace without Justice: Biblical Perspectives on Peace and Justice," in S.T. Martinez (ed.), *Christ our Peace: Building a Just Society* (Japan 1990), 3.
18. K.C. Abraham, "No Peace without Justice," 3.
19. K.C. Abraham, "No Peace without Justice," 4.
20. K.C. Abraham, "No Peace without Justice," 4.
21. K.C. Abraham, "No Peace without Justice," 5.
22. K.C. Abraham, "No Peace without Justice," 5.
23. See Ann P. Wansbrough, "Wholeness of Community: Meaning of Peace for People with Disabilities," in S.T. Martinez (ed.), *Christ our Peace: Building a Just Society* (Japan 1990), 23.
24. Ann P. Wansbrough, "Wholeness of Community," 23.
25. Noriel C. Capulong, "From Swords to Ploughshares: A Foundation for Peace and Prosperity," in S.T. Martinez (ed.), *Christ our Peace: Building a Just Society* (Japan 1990), 73-74.
26. Noriel C. Capulong, "From Swords to Ploughshares," 75.

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89835 68946