



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 6 September by the Right Reverend Christopher Chessun, former Bishop of Southwark, and Bishop Protector of the Community of St Francis (CSF), European Province

Prayer and Peace

The fifth in a series of sermons for the Year of Prayer at Wells Cathedral.

Readings: Exodus 12: 1-14 and Matthew 18: 15-20

Prayer and Peace are inseparable and I am grateful to the Dean for inviting me today and asking me to reflect accordingly on how we as Christians pray for peace. It is also a great joy that this weekend we welcome here the happy band of pilgrims who have been participating in the Peace Pilgrimage in this 800th anniversary year of the death of St Francis. I gather tomorrow the Dean and Bishop Michael will be walking with other pilgrims from Wells to Street. There have been relays of pilgrims over the 80 days starting in Northumberland in July and drawing in places and cities with Franciscan connections and many of the houses of the brothers and sisters of the First Order of the Society of St Francis, which I have supported as their Bishop Protector in recent years, handing on the role to Bishop Michael exactly a month ago. Among the pilgrims I was very taken by a little film on social media featuring Sr Maureen from the Community of St Francis, who reminded us that Francis was known as a man of peace and is recorded as saying, “*The Lord gave me the greeting, the Lord give you peace.*” It seems to me as if the way of St Francis and St Clare is to prefer the little things, making a contribution where we can and quietly, which is both the better way and the way of Our Lord and this applies to the way we should live our lives peaceably. If there is to be peace in the world, then it begins with reflecting on what peace is for each of us, peace in our hearts, peace with our neighbours, for this in our small way helps to make for peace in the world. Our Gospel reading today from St Matthew is also about what makes for peace and what we need to do ourselves to address and call wrongdoing to account while seeking reconciliation, forgiveness and healing.

At the beginning of March I co-led my final Diocesan Pilgrimage in Southwark and it was to Rome and Assisi. It was ecumenical with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark. When we were nearing Assisi we went first of all to Santa Maria degli Angeli and prayed in the Porziuncula and in that instant we were transported into the world of Francis and Clare. At Assisi we stayed at the Hotel Castello near the gate that led up to the great Basilica. There was a constant tramping of the feet of pilgrims making their way up the steep slope to venerate the relics of St Francis which for 28 days were placed in a glass casket in the Lower Church and the following morning we filed past the mortal remains of Il Poverello, clearly very small in stature, after a Sung Mass in the Upper Church sitting under the Giotto fresco which depicted Francis renouncing his father and worldly possessions in front of Bishop Guido of Assisi. In the nearby church of Santa Maria Maggiore, the mortal remains of St Carlo Acutis, who died at the age of 15 from Leukemia in 2006, were also on display in a glass casket – also attracting large numbers of pilgrims. By contrast he was dressed in the jeans and trainers he wore in daily life, the first millennial saint, canonised by Pope Leo a year ago.

Earlier in the year the Chief of Defence Staff said, *“this is the most dangerous time I have known in my working life”*. I do not doubt him. So, there is good reason for Christians to think about peace, to reflect deeply on what it means to follow the King of Peace and not the god of war. Pope Leo caused consternation in certain political circles this year when he said in his Palm Sunday homily, *“this is our God: Jesus, King of Peace, who rejects war, whom no one can use to justify war. He does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them, saying: ‘Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen: your hands are full of blood’ (Isaiah 1:15)”*. But is not this the Gospel we proclaim? Why should this be controversial? Well, perhaps that is because peace is not simply the absence of war. Rather, war comes from the lack of peace within ourselves. In recent years each January I have participated in the Holy Land Coordination, mandated by the Vatican, as an Anglican bishop joining Roman Catholic bishops from around the world to meet with Christian communities in Gaza, in Israel, in the West Bank of Palestine to share together, to learn from each other and to pray for peace. Each year I realise the importance of Prayer – praying together, of Presence – our presence to develop ongoing relationships and to support the continuing ancient indigenous Christian presence in the land, of Pilgrimage – we are there as pilgrims making an outward journey together that is also of deep spiritual enlightenment, and lastly of Pressure – returning to our homelands and willing to express our solidarity and encourage our

governments to work to ensure that there will be peace with justice for all the peoples of the Holy Land, which is still far from being achieved. Yet none of this will bear fruit unless we discover that peace is something that must dwell within us if we are to draw others to it.

St Augustine said, *“If you wish to draw others to peace, first have it yourselves; be steadfast in peace yourselves. To inflame others, you must have the flame burning within you”* (Sermon 357, quoted by Pope Leo in his 2026 ‘Message for the World Day of Peace’). My brothers and sisters, given the desperate need for peace in the world today, let us cultivate peace in our hearts so that others may be drawn to its warmth.

We know of Francis’s devotion to Christ, and especially to his suffering and passion and cruel death on the Cross. Towards the end of his life, in the spring of 1225, having recently received the stigmata at La Verna, Francis was gravely ill, in constant pain, and nearly blind from a severe eye disease. Clare we are told nursed him lovingly at the Convent of San Damiano, where 20 years earlier praying before the Cross in the Church he had heard Jesus say, *“Go and repair my house”*. Francis, wracked with pain and suffering himself nevertheless received a divine assurance of his ultimate salvation and filled with overwhelming gratitude he began to compose the Canticle of the Sun, which concludes, *“Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks, And serve him with great humility.”*

My friends, on this first Sunday of the newly established and authorised Festival of Creation in Christ we join Francis and Clare in longing for a loving world that embraces the spirit of harmony, joy, and simplicity each committing to doing our little bit for peace and reconciliation. Amen.

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