

THE UNPEACEFUL PEACE

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Some years ago Anglicans revived the ancient practice of ‘The Peace’ in which people are encouraged to greet one another with the words ‘The peace of the Lord be always with you’, to which the reply is made ‘and also with you’. Although I find this wording unnatural and stilted, the underlying idea is surely good. It has its roots in the repeated New Testament injunction for Christians to greet one another with the ‘kiss of love’ (1 Peter 5.13; see also Rom 16.16; 2 Corinthians 13.12; 1 Thess 5.26) – or as JB Philips in his translation of 1 Corinthians 16.22 put it: “I should like you to shake hands all round as a sign of Christian love”! Whether one kisses, shakes hands, or even hugs, is immaterial. What is right is that we Christians should welcome one another. Furthermore, this welcome should be verbalised – if not in the formal words of the Peace, then in a simple word of greeting or a more enthusiastic word of love. And although there should never be a service when we do not welcome one another, the giving of the Peace is particularly fitting when we come to gather around the Lord’s Table. For it is above all at the Table that we celebrate our oneness in Jesus – indeed, the closer we come to him, the closer we come to one another. Furthermore, the giving of the Peace gives an opportunity for those who for one reason or another have been out of fellowship to reaffirm their relationship in Christ before they take communion (otherwise they are in danger of eating and drinking judgment upon themselves: see 1 Cor 11.29). My own practice is to allow the Peace to become the lead-in to the breaking of bread and drinking of wine. Unless we are welcoming new people into church membership, the Peace follows on the hymn after the sermon. I encourage everybody to move out of their seats and greet one another as they feel fit. I normally suggest that people greet those they have not spoken to that day; and if it is somebody they don’t know, then to introduce themselves in the giving of the Peace. At this point the congregation erupts as everybody moves around greeting one another in the name of Jesus. After five minutes or so I then bring the congregation to order and we sing a simple song about the love which binds us together (e.g. ‘A new commandment I give to you’). Although in a church of any size it is impossible for everybody to greet one another (I reckon that 12 is about the maximum number of people one can reasonably greet in five minutes), it is nonetheless a wonderfully inclusive event. Without exception visitors are overwhelmed by the sense of love which is present. Yes, the giving of the Peace is a noisy event – yet only the cynic would describe it as ‘unpeaceful’.

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