

The Peace That Transforms

Homily by Father Peter Jae Choi – May 20, 2025

At the height of the Civil War in the United States, President Abraham Lincoln referred to the Southerners, during a speech, as fellow human beings who were in error.

An elderly lady chastised him for not calling them irreconcilable enemies who must be destroyed. Abraham Lincoln replied, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”

This quote carries a deep meaning, reminding us of the transformative power of friendship and its ability to overcome conflicts through understanding and compassion.

In the first reading today, Saint Paul—who everyone thought was stoned to death and dragged out of the city—instantly got up as soon as the disciples gathered around him, and continued with his missionary work.

How did he end up like this?

Just a bit of background: Paul and Barnabas first went to Antioch. When their fame and popularity among the people grew, certain Jews became envious and kicked them out of the city.

Paul and Barnabas then went to Iconium. After performing miracles, the whole town became divided. When those opposed to them wanted to assault and stone them, Paul and Barnabas left the city.

Finally, they arrived in Lystra and healed a paralyzed man. When the man began to walk, people thought Paul and Barnabas were deities—Zeus and Hermes in disguise—and began offering sacrifices to them.

At that moment, some Jews arrived and incited violence. Paul was stoned and left for dead. But since Lystra was a Roman colony, the Jews feared the strong hand of Roman justice. They tried to get rid of Paul's body to escape the consequences of their riot.

There lay Paul, thought to be dead and not even given a proper burial. It's highly likely that he was badly injured, as he was motionless and appeared to be dead. The fact that there's no mention of the disciples praying for him suggests they believed he had died.

His ability to get up and return to the town seems to me a testimony to God's miraculous healing power.

Despite obstacles, challenges, and persecutions during the missionary journey with Barnabas, Saint Paul didn't seem fazed at all. He just gets up and returns to the same place.

Imagine their shock. First, they must have been stunned to see someone they thought was dead come back to life. Second, he didn't come back to seek revenge but continued preaching the good news of God's kingdom.

Imagine Paul's return as the kind of peace Jesus speaks of in the Gospel.

In the Gospel, Jesus promises to give peace—but not as the world gives.

How does the world understand peace? A quick Google search gives a few definitions: freedom from civil unrest or disorder, public order and security, or the absence of war and violence.

But is the mere absence of conflict or war all there is to peace?

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah says:

“They will beat their swords into ploughshares,

and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not pick up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.”

Peace is not merely the absence of war—it is the transformation of weapons into tools for nurturing life. From what destroys human life, to what sustains it.

Peace is not merely refraining from hurting our neighbour—it is loving the neighbour.

If we’re not careful, we can sometimes mistake our life’s goal as the pursuit of happiness. But it should really be the pursuit of the kingdom of God.

In God’s kingdom, there is perfect love, which casts out all fear. There is unconditional forgiveness, which heals wounds of division and brings peace and harmony.

Saint Paul had to learn this the hard way. He, too, had once been on the other side of the fence. When someone was different from him and his orthodox views, he stoned them to death.

But now the tables had turned, and he was on the receiving end of persecution. He had to learn to love and forgive like Jesus in order for his missionary work to be fruitful.

Learning to love like Jesus takes time, effort, and—most importantly—our cooperation with God’s grace. We need to surrender and let go of our right to retaliate, and leave the outcome to God.

Remember the words of Mahatma Gandhi: “An eye for an eye makes the world full of blind people.”

When someone has wronged us, the damage is already done. Most of the time, it cannot be undone or repaired. The urge to exact revenge—to inflict the same pain we felt—is real. But can we really be healed by wounding another person?

No. Wounding another person does not heal us. Only compassion and forgiveness can heal.

Saint Paul returned to the very town that mistreated and abused him, because he had let go of resentment and the desire for revenge. As a result, he was able to show God’s love and forgiveness—and win them over for God.

Have you ever struggled with forgiving and loving someone? Have you ever prayed to God to increase your capacity for love and forgiveness?

The people you struggle to forgive may be the very instruments God is using to make you a more loving and forgiving person—an instrument to make you holy.

I once saw an inspirational quote I’d like to share with you:

“I asked God for flowers, and he gave me rain.”

God doesn’t always give us directly what we ask for. Most of the time, he gives us the circumstances we need to grow into the person who is ready to receive what we’ve asked for.

We often have lessons to learn before we’re ready. He doesn’t just give us the flowers—he gives us the rain that helps us grow.

Saint Paul became a pro at believing and forgiving—not despite the mistreatment and abuse he endured, but because of it.

It didn't destroy him.
It made him.