

# Christ's Love, Peace, Justice, and Freedom Seen against the Challenges of the Modern World

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## Abstract

*This is an edited version of an address given in Paralimni at the Open University of Cyprus in January 2019 during a meeting of the assembly planning committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC), hosted by the Archdiocese of Constantia and Ammochostos. It is a reflection on the theme set for the WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2021, "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity."*

## Keywords

*Christ, love, peace, justice, freedom*

## Where Do We Stand and What Do We Experience in the Contemporary World?

We live in a time in which humanity fights and struggles due to the lack of love for justice, peace, and freedom in a climate of confusion – “in the calm before the storm,” as the poets would say. In the 1960s and 1970s, the world rebelled for freedom; in the 1980s it was concerned with ecological issues; and nowadays the world's greatest desire is for justice and peace.

Whoever feels the pulse of the world knows well that justice and peace are threatened by a third world war that would bring destruction and the end of the world. It is thus

becoming more and more obvious that our world faces dramatic problems that we believe can be solved using ecclesial tradition and experience as an ethical foundation. But our dilemma is how we, the faithful, can successfully face the most important demand for love, justice, and peace and continue in our quest for the establishment of freedom.

At present, we are still experiencing the storms and thunderstorms of war and its horrors. We have become birds in the storm. We are living in agony, fear, and the uncertainty of tomorrow. We are experiencing total insecurity. We are afraid that peace and justice will abandon us and that we will wait anxiously for their return.

## Recalling “Love”

Much has been said about love, a concept that has been abused like no other in this futile world.<sup>1</sup> Love is a cornerstone of the Orthodox faith. Its importance is explained to us by St John the Theologian: “God is love” (1 John 4:7). Any rational approach to love is already condemned to failure.

Through the centuries, the Fathers of our church have extensively explained to us the notion of love, as they first experienced it through their relationship with God.

According to Nicholas Cabasilas, “the power to love is planted in the human soul from the beginning.”<sup>2</sup> St Maximus the Confessor in his “Chapters on Love” states that “Love is a good disposition of the soul by which one prefers no being to the knowledge of God. It is impossible to reach the habit of this love if one has any attachment to earthly things.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the knowledge of love is the fruit of approaching God, the knowledge of God. True love toward our neighbour only comes when we love God and if we follow the first commandment of the Lord: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).<sup>4</sup>

Loving the holy God means unconditional obedience to his holy commandments, without the filter of reasoning. Today we are missing the words of prophets, the cry of anguish by John the Baptist, St Cosmas of Aetolia, and so many other modern saints and others.

1 See Aristidis Daskalakis, “Love and ‘Love,’” *Aktines*, 3 January 2019.

2 See Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 7.61: “This love of God is not human but divine.”

3 Maximus Confessor, “The Four Hundred Chapters on Love,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. George Berthold (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985), 36.

4 This commandment does not allow any of our actions, thoughts, or words, from the perspective of a distorted human-centred “love,” to contravene any of the other commandments of God.

This is not a time to have faith in God and to love the Lord. The “love” toward our neighbour comes first. But this neighbour is our own self. In the face of others, we justify our own passions. Therefore, this fake “love” that gives remission of sins to the unrepentant neighbours and to us leads us to the cliff and to our deaths, according to the words “if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit” (Matt. 15:14). If we follow the blind, we will fall off the cliff and perish.

It is a fact that the sirens of love mislead us. They lead us astray and they lead us away from the final destination, from “Ithaca” and the kingdom of Heaven.

A love that is the fruit of repentance and thus derives from the Holy Spirit struggles for the salvation of the neighbour. It would sound the alarm bell, awaken the conscience. It would not be pandering. It would not corrupt faith. This may all seem like a criticism or judgment toward some of our brothers; however, we do not judge people but situations.

Do not forget that the apostles and the martyrs of the church were not persecuted because they preached love and solidarity, but because they preached about “Jesus Christ.” They were persecuted about matters of faith.

As a matter of fact, the person who loves accepts their beloved as they are and does not require them to change. Thus, my passions and sins, says the human being, will not be judged by God, and I do not need to force myself to act on his teachings out of fear alone. With only one prayer to him, God becomes love and accepts us in the kingdom of heaven. God thinks that with his logic he can understand everything.

A modern thinker, Fr Georgy Belodurov, from the Russian city of Tver, notes that “the notion that God loves humankind, is an undoubted fact, for He sent his only Son for our salvation.” But how can we then interpret the well-known words of God, “He that I love I also pester,” which also express the divine love toward human beings? But what if God’s providence is not a type of judgment as we are everyday warned by being sent successes, hopes and joys, as well as sorrows, sicknesses and death.<sup>5</sup>

But then again, rich is his mercy, to thank him and praise him. But we most of the time forget to thank and praise him. If we do not live in a Christian fashion, spiritually, we will not understand the providence of God.

5 See V. Malcev, “‘Pink Christianity’: The Meaning of ‘Love’ Has Become Obscure. Why?” *Orthodox Saint Petersburg*, trans. from Russian, *Orthodoxanswers*, 29 December 2018; English version: [http://www.oodegr.com/english/theos/genika/pink\\_christianity.htm](http://www.oodegr.com/english/theos/genika/pink_christianity.htm).

This is why we do not doubt that all people will suffer God's final judgment, since he has said it. But is it ever possible to have his judgment without his love?<sup>6</sup>

The metaphysical, spiritual, and ethical drought and the stagnation that results has led to a crisis at many levels. The results of this are seen in today's mental fissures, personal degradation, and the alienation of the spirit of every transcendental society, as well as in the mental flight toward the holy world of Christ, who can be the only stable compass and exact scale to weigh every value that gives meaning to the goods of the earth and the spirit.

## The Struggle for Justice and Peace

Since its very beginnings, the church has been sent to the world to preach about love, justice, peace, and freedom. Christ's peace is the mature fruit of building everything on him; the revelation of the holiness and grandeur of the human image as an image of God; the projection of the organic unity of the human race and the world with him; the universality of the ideals of peace, freedom, unity, and social justice; and finally the fruitfulness of Christian love between people. True peace is the very face of the God-man. The church of Hagia Eirene in Constantinople was dedicated to our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the peace and freedom that has been given, for which the church always prays in its daily prayers.

We need to emphasize that the spiritual gift of peace depends on human synergy. The Holy Spirit grants spiritual gifts when the human heart ascends toward God through repentantly seeking God's justice. The gift of peace is revealed where Christians make good efforts in the works of faith, love, and hope in Jesus Christ.

The Orthodox Church considers that it is its duty to welcome everything that truly serves peace and opens the way to justice, brotherhood, freedom, and love. In any such path toward arriving at a just world, we are called upon to think how justice and peace are interrelated with the realization of the kingdom of God and our salvation.

We cannot remain indifferent to the tragedies that are currently taking place in Syria, in Iraq, in Palestine and the Middle East in general, in Nigeria, in Sudan, and other parts of the world. And yet our inaction renders whole states and nations unable to take radical initiatives and decisions to bring an end to the tragedy of the bloodshed experienced by so many people every day.

6 All will enter into the kingdom of heaven? Both the good and the bad? The beneficent, the gracious, and the generous? The greedy, the stingy, and the gluttonous? The exploiters, the cold hearted, the criminals, and all the unrepentant? Of course not. There, in the kingdom of heaven, that is not possible. As it was said by the Lord – is it possible to not have justice and love?

In our daily routine, each one of us is often overwhelmed by feelings of disappointment and anxiety about the evolution of humankind, which unfortunately we are usually watching as mere onlookers. But this negative perspective is not the only one in the world.

If we turn our eyes to different areas, we will see people suffering from tribalism, others who are poor and oppressed, religious wars, as well as the persecution of people who have proclaimed the Christian truths and have become martyrs for their faith in their struggle for the renewal and transformation of the world. Christ himself stands alongside these new martyrs of faith, whose church, the assembly of the “chosen people,” united in all humankind, preaches the gospel of peace and righteousness (Eph. 2:17). This is the peace that was promised by Christ to his disciples at the last supper. It is a promise that was given to the world as well: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

The Orthodox Church recognizes and constantly highlights the centrality of peace and justice in the lives of human beings. One of the official documents of the Holy and Great Council addressed the issue of peace and justice, stating,

Drawing from these principles and the accumulated experience and teaching of her patristic, liturgical, and ascetical tradition, the Orthodox Church shares the concern and anxiety of contemporary humanity with regard to fundamental existential questions that preoccupy the world today. She thus desires to help resolve these issues, allowing the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7), reconciliation, and love to prevail in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Peace *and* war are born in the hearts of human beings, because the heart, according to the biblical definition of the term, is the centre of the human being, the place in which all relations with other human beings are formed. But this is also where passions, licentiousness, envy, and so on are found, the old imperfections of the fallen person, and that give birth to sin. It is sin which nurtures every social injustice, every upheaval of human affairs. It is, of course, sin that gives birth to every political system that is decayed, and it is found at the roots of war and all the suffering that ensues.

But peace, also, is born in the heart of the reborn person, because the reborn person has become godlike and has received the illumination of the Holy Spirit. This kind of

7 “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World: The Contribution of the Orthodox Church in Realizing Peace, Justice, Freedom, Fraternity and Love between Peoples, and in the Removal of Racial and Other Discriminations,” Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, <http://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>.

peace has nothing to do with the fleeting moment of peace, which happens only apart from God and which is usually based on fear, terror, selfish interests, and injustice.

The struggle for peace brings people closer together and helps them to better understand one another, to grasp the deeper the important aspects of life, and demonstrate a high sense of responsibility.<sup>8</sup> The Christian who struggles for peace experiences the spiritual renewal of their own existence and feels compassion toward other Christians – and even toward people of other faiths or religions who do not know our faith or the gospel.

The struggle for justice and peace has no limits and boundaries because it is based on the redemptive message of Christ the liberator and on the love of God for human beings.

Every Christian longs for justice and peace deeply in their heart. However, history teaches us that humankind cannot alone create or maintain peace.

The only thing the current world's political leaders have to do is to present their enemy as a horrible beast to ignite a war. Even though political peace is not identical to the peace of God, these notions are not irrelevant. The nations that coexist in peace are closer to the ideal of the kingdom of God than those that live in hate and enmity. Peace based on reconciliation has been taught by the Lord himself, and we must be ready to bear witness to it through Jesus Christ, with our words and deeds, something that requires love between us, and even love for our “enemies.”<sup>9</sup>

There is also the issue of social, political, and economic justice. People want justice and have every right to demand it. And we have to proclaim it and serve it in all its forms. We are facing the greatest injustices that predominate in the modern world: global oppression, exploitation, inequality, tyranny, the new rich, and so on. And others unfortunately are deprived of freedom and justice and are obliged to accept the cruelty of life as it is manifested.

The church teaches that injustice in all its forms is a distortion of life and a sin. It is not the result of an accident of history or biology. Where there is injustice, someone is somehow responsible. Christ is the fulfilment of the law and of the prophets, and with his unwavering demand for justice, he promised to establish justice in his eternal kingdom. This is an important element of his mission as Messiah. He predicts that until his second coming in glory, there will be no justice on the earth. But he demands from

8 Ibid.

9 Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). The apostle Paul speaks of grace and peace (Phil. 1:2) because God's peace is the unformed energy of the divine grace.

*his* people that they be thirsty for justice and do whatever is possible to help it prevail in life, here and now.

In the divine liturgy we pray: “Your peace and your love give to us, God our Lord, for you give us everything.” If the Lord has not just given us much, but everything, then we, more than other people, must love and serve justice on earth, and from “everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

## **Cries of Freedom**

People everywhere yearn to be free and unbound. True freedom, in Christian love and form, is neither passive resignation to fate nor an impetuous rebellion against the conditions and structures of life. We would better say that it is a joyful acceptance of the worldly conditions given by a wise, graceful, and loving God who has given each one a life of calling to service and ministry to themselves and to humanity.

The content of liberation, according to Christian faith, necessarily involves faith in divine providence and the recognition that every person has a unique call from God to exult, transform, and be redeemed from the particular conditions of their life in ways offered and revealed by God.

People are genuinely free when they love their lives, their time, their place, their calling, and their duty; when they believe that the life given to them is the best way to fulfil their destiny; when they struggle to achieve their salvation through obedience to God and by the ministry of their fellow human being within their own individual conditions set or allowed by God; and when they trust the will of God, which is “in the interest of all wisdom of man.” Christ himself is the perfect example of this behaviour. He embraced the conditions of his earthly life. He was loyal to the Father “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8), to his Holy Mother and his protector Joseph, “and was obedient to them” (Luke 2:51). But he was also loyal to the state government, as he paid the taxes (Matt.h 17:27).

Everyone is called into the freedom of Christ, the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). The letter to the Galatians clearly refers to the call of the faithful for freedom: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Gal. 5:13-14).

Therefore, it is in Christ *and* in the church that we find the representation and notion of true freedom, which is the release from the law “of sin and of death” (Rom. 8:2). Only in Christ and in the church do we find the pattern for a proper relationship between



human beings, with their mental and emotional experiences, their earthly institutions, and their stories and with the issues of life and with God himself.

This “proper relationship” is true freedom. When one finds this freedom and experiences it, one is indeed free. Without it there is only enslavement to corruption, to the “empty deceit, according to human tradition and according to the elemental spirits of the universe” (Col. 2:8), and fruitless dependence from the graceless authorities “of our time,” the form of which is “passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31).

True freedom is experienced in the church, as it is the kingdom of God on earth. Our testimony and our ministry to the world is to invite people to see and become acquainted with all of this, so that they can be freed from the futility of their deceit, from their disappointments, their discontents, and their despair.

God’s command to love our neighbour, even our enemy, means that all Christians are called to love justice and to keep peace with all people, to the extent, of course, that it depends on us. This is why it is incompatible with the Christian life to actively support or silently adhere to an obvious injustice.

God has made a covenant – a covenant with his people to be worshipped and glorified with the life of this people, in a world of justice and freedom. The glory of God shines, despite the disbelief of the people, because of the faithfulness of God, which renews his mercy and forgives his people: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13).

## **Awaiting New Hope for Love, Justice, Peace, and Freedom**

In Christianity, there is a tendency to regard the spiritual tradition in terms of war. The cross of Christ is for the Apostle Paul the place of the decisive victory of Christ in his battle against the demonic powers (see Col. 2:15), and the resurrection of the Lord represents the “first fruits” of this victory in the world, when God is “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:20-28). We must engage vigorously against the forces of evil and the spiritual armies of darkness still permeating the world (see Eph. 6:17).

Today, the passion of the mystic Christ, embodied in the life of Christians who have been sacrificed that justice may prevail, has the same structure as the passion of Christ as a historical figure. Like Christ, many people today are persecuted, murdered, or imprisoned because they defend the rights of those held in contempt and defend the righteous demands of the poor. They accept the faith in God that asks them to sacrifice and witness in Christ. Sacrifice and martyrdom are superior to life itself because they belong to God and his kingdom. Such people prefer the glory of a violent death to the joy of an accursed freedom, as it has been put by a martyr of the third century.



The resurrection of the crucified Christ attests to fact that the sacrifice of a person's life out of love for the "neighbour" that is tested is participation in the fullness of life and in the definitive triumph of justice. The crucified Christ is also the one that lives forever.

A major question faced by Christians all over the world and especially we, the Orthodox, is what is more important: the ultimate triumph of conformism in society or the creation of a *new* society, in which bitter memories give way to reconciliation and new ways to form relations with fellow human beings? We have inherited a tradition of martyrdom and we recognize that a life of love is most important. And love is expressed in each person's particular way.

Nowadays, love can sometimes be expressed in a kind of overt or covert proselytism. Most Christians share the Apostle Paul's belief that if our words are "orthodox" and angelic, if we don't truly have love that is identical to selfless offering and sacrifice, we are but "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1).

We live in a world that has concluded a covenant with death. But we also live as witnesses to a God who has concluded a covenant with life. The new testament "in the blood" of Christ is the proclamation of God and the renewal of the ancient creational *Amen* in life, the final seal in the divine decision to heal all creation.

Christians who understand the signs of the times know that the gospel is in direct contradiction with the dominant spirit of our times, the spirit deriving from the covenant of the world with death. The unity of humankind – which has been shattered by our pride, the will to be the ultimate master of all creation, and death as separation from God – can only be restored by Christ and through Christ. With the divine eucharist we enter this infinite unity, we become members one of another, responsible for one of "each of us," who bears the whole of humanity inside himself. The eucharistic bread produces something more than just creating a connection between the resurrected Christ and each one of us, more than revealing the visible unity of the church. It introduces us into the real unity of all humankind through communion and participation in the grace of God.

People in our century have witnessed a great wave of liberation movements, giving rise to several independent new states, usually by being liberated from the occupation of a foreign power. This situation is still a fact. However, we believe that human evil will try to prevent this inevitable historical course. The rich and powerful countries try to force the developing ones to grow internally in a way that perpetuates their dependence. People are still tortured by racial discrimination and various forms of humiliation and mistreatment. We are all debtors of love and justice.

The salvation of the human being has two dimensions for the Christian: the *transcendental* and the *earthly*. Without peace with God, there can be no true peace with human beings; purification from the passions and a sacrificial change in heart remain prerequisites for a better world.

There cannot be a *new* humanity before people change. Speaking about the two dimensions of Christianity, we must describe them as on the one hand faith, prayer, church, the mysteries and eternity, and on the other a struggle for the transformation of life, for justice, solidarity, peace, disarmament, reconciliation, and a bridging of the gap between the rich and the poor, strong and weak, as well as ecological vigilance.

The greatest duty of Christians, therefore, is not some empty, general discussion about justice and peace, but above all the efforts and struggles to uphold human rights and restore the conditions that make mutual trust possible, in this way, rendering war inconceivable. This is not sterile morality but the only realistic approach to the problem, because as long as love, justice, and peace are put to one side and freedom is undermined, the risk of war will always be present.

## Has Ecumenism Already Died?

During its 10th Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea, in 2013, the World Council of Churches (WCC) launched a new initiative for its activities in the period until the next assembly, titled the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. During this period, all the activities and programmes of the WCC, as well as certain member churches, have focused on the pilgrimage, with two main points of reference: justice and peace.

There were high expectations, and this proposal by the assembly was accepted with great enthusiasm by churches and others. Many believed that the churches would be able to join this effort and that they would be able to respond to this effort with a common voice, despite the differences that divide their unity. They also discussed a path of pilgrimage such as this but with elements of spirituality, reflecting the internal liturgical and spiritual life of the church, as experienced by the faithful in their everyday struggle for survival, with the primary aim of saving their souls and gaining the kingdom of God.

But when we mention the term “pilgrimage,” how is it understood by the various Christian churches and faiths?

Many were aware, not least in the WCC and the churches, that a path of pilgrimage is, in principle, both an invitation and a challenge, and many questions arose, with doubts, questioning, as well as suspicions, about the assembly decision to create such a new perspective, creating controversies as to the interpretative and theological approach of the

path being followed. Many have joined in the years since 2013 to offer an ecumenical understanding, so that the churches can express themselves in common and respond to the questioning and to the ultimate goal of this pilgrimage. The problem, however, is that this has an ecclesiological dimension and perspective, where the unity of the church dominates the interpretative explanation of the whole issue.

This is where we believe the problem is found. Since the churches, as well as the ecumenical movement in particular, have not yet found a common view on ecclesiological issues that they are able to comprehend and express together, rather than just limiting themselves to formal convergence, how is it possible to talk about a perceived ultimate goal?

The overall theme of the forthcoming WCC assembly is “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” It is a fact that the issue of unity is dominant everywhere, and it is not possible to override it because it remains relevant since the foundation of the WCC, which has the unity of the church as a primary aim and as the fulfilment of its mission, during its more than 70 years of existence.

We must also mention that this pilgrimage has socio-political, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. So how is it possible to walk this path, amid the global economic crisis, the violation of human rights, attempts to circumvent Christian values, the fear of war, poverty, misery, and the lack of peace, reconciliation, love, and freedom?

Modern humanity and our society in general are “in a hurry” due to globalization, and we lose our meaning and mission day by day.

How is it possible to speak of the salvation of the human soul when the human being has lost the being “in our image” and the “after our likeness” of God, when human beings have deviated from their basic and primary purpose, which is none other than the attainment of the kingdom of God?

How is it possible for human beings, under such conditions of panic and the horror of war, to attempt to speak about justice, peace, and reconciliation when they have not found peace with themselves, when their hearts have dried up from the lack of love, when Christ doesn’t fill their hearts and lives?

The struggle for the realization of justice is a continuous and everyday Golgotha, a cross where pain, sorrow, despair, and frustration dominate and reign in the life of the modern person.

The human being has become “the bird of terror,” as the poets have said. They have lost the hope for tomorrow, are interested in the ephemeral, and are unable to follow

the pilgrimage of love deriving from this love of Christ, leading to Christian unity and the reconciliation of the churches and peoples of humankind.

Thus, we can reasonably ask the question: Has ecumenism already died? Is there really no hope for a better tomorrow, where the love of Christ and the reconciliation of the world will reign? If it really is this tragic condition that people have been wishing for and expecting for many years, then what is it all about?

Let us therefore be in peace with Jesus Christ who is the “God of peace” (1 Thess. 5:23), and within us, and with others, be acting with love, justice, and freedom so that the world will have peace. We pray that, in divine favour and blessing, peace and justice are established, love is victorious over indifference to fellow human beings, and solidarity and reconciliation prevail.