

The peaceable priestly kingdom (Exodus 19:2-8a; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:23)

If it's in the first verse of Romans 5, it must be important to Paul.

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Our reading from Exodus identifies Israel as a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. (First Peter 2:9 takes this up as an identification for the church.) Anciently and today, kingdoms come into conflict, and nations war.

So consider what happens if we allow our political imagination to be grasped and shaped by Paul's claim in Romans 5 that the normative social configuration of the people of God is precisely peace, rather than violence and enmity.

In a stimulating pamphlet in the Grove Biblical Series, Mike Gorman argues that both Luke and Paul see the church as "God's peace-filled and peaceable people." Today's reading, from the heart of Paul's magnum opus, places peace at the heart of the gospel. A concept you encounter in the first verse of Romans 5 must be central to Paul's understanding of the gospel. And it must relate in some way to the problem of violence chronicled in Romans 1-3, and to the emphasis on harmony that runs from chapters 9 to 15.

Romans does begin to feel like it's taking a page—well, a sentence really—from [Marc Laidlaw](#): You don't get very far before Paul says, more or less, "and then the murders began." (Technically, "murder" doesn't appear until 1:29, but enmity is implicit in God's wrath [1:18], and violence implicit in the Lord resurrected from

death by crucifixion [1:4].) Human enmity with God and with one another is woven into the first chapters of Romans.

Romans moves toward a grand affirmation that peace can be the way of life for God's people.

So invite the priestly kingdom to remember that "the kingdom of God is ... peace..." (Romans 14:17). Invite the holy nation to "live peaceably with all" (12:18), to "never avenge" (12:19), to "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (14:19).

If you invite the church to embrace its identity as a peaceful kingdom of priests, as a disarmed holy nation, then you should take note, in the reading from Matthew, that the kingdom arrives without a military escort or a stockpile of resources to render disciples invulnerable. Jesus predicts a pretty grim future for those who embody his kingdom in word and deed—rejection and betrayal, death and hatred. But an Easter people recognizes that vulnerability and disarmament open us to blessings like hospitality, inspiration, and finally resurrection (10:23 implicitly promises Easter).

A collect from the Book of Common Prayer says this:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen.

In the end, the priestly kingdom must look like its priest-king.