

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
October 4, 2020 - Streaming Mass
27th Sunday of Year Phil 4:6-9

A few years ago the Times columnist, Thomas Friedman, wrote a best-seller, "The World is Flat," in which he tried to show how the global competitive playing field is being leveled by the Internet. But there is another sense in which we can say "the world is flat," and that is to speak of the world in which we live, work and play—the secular world. It is a strictly materialist universe, wherein any evidence of the holy, of the sacred, of God, has been banished. It is a world without mystery or paradox, one where deals are made, but promises not kept. Consequently, any attempt to find meaning and purpose in life will have to be achieved without appeal to the divine or the transcendent. We are on our own; there is nothing more for us, nothing beyond this. That is the secular way of seeing things.

Many are quite content to strive for their goals within this context, even to develop their own notion of who and what they desire to be, their identity, without conforming to the models handed down and imposed upon them. But, for others there may be a sense of loss, that something rather undefineable is missing; that their actions, goals, achievements, and the like, have a lack of weight, gravity or substance—some deeper resonance which should be there, but for them is not. This feeling of flatness becomes most evident in life's rights of passage: birth, marriage, death, so that even people who have no connection or affinity with religion may feel a pressure, feel a need, to mark the event somehow—to give it a significance that the secular world cannot provide. So, they turn to the rituals of the church or synagogue to fill this void, but not surprisingly they find them empty. Some try to find a sense of purpose in politics. But when politics replaces religion it so easily becomes a kind of blood sport. Politics may still possess the drive, the dedication, the commitment that religion once provided, but too often its practitioners are bereft of any respect for those with whom they differ, of a recognition of our common weakness as human beings, and especially of a spirit of forgiveness for past wrongs of others.

This secular view would look at individuals as essentially disconnected, free-floating, like so many steel balls in a pinball machine, bouncing from bumper to bumper, maneuvering one's passage as best one can, but essentially left to the whims of chance, of fortune. And, even though we prefer a vision of a life that is essentially spiritual or religious, it is this flat, secular world that we have to engage day in and day out, and which over time, if we are not careful, if we are not focused on the spiritual, has the potential to erode what we once treasured.

But the fact that we come here from week to week testifies to that desire for something more, the desire, in one way or another, to be grounded, to be anchored in God. In today's second reading, we hear St. Paul speak of "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding." This is the very real effect in one's life of being grounded in God. For St. Paul it is this sense of peace, of serenity, that can be the defense against the anxieties of life. It is something deeper than happiness or pleasure, and can exist in the midst of pain and suffering. St. Paul could certainly speak from his own experience, having on occasions been slandered, beaten, jailed, and twice shipwrecked. And through it all, he was at peace. But it is not a peace that leads to an escape from the challenges of life. Quite the opposite, because one possesses a source of strength greater than the mouthings of some political pundit or psychological guru, the person of faith can enter the fray without fear, without bitterness and without rancor.

In a few moments we will welcome the risen Christ in the Eucharist. Let us pray that that encounter may enable each of us to keep our focus on Him who is our Center, and with that awareness come to know the "peace that surpasses all understanding.