

The Greek philosopher Plotinus once said that a person comes to resemble that which they continually contemplate. In other words: your character is shaped and moulded by what you're always thinking about. In these days of conflict and violence, then, we need all the more to contemplate, to think about peace. It's difficult but completely necessary.

Peace isn't an absence of war – it isn't an absence of anything it's a presence. Just as light isn't an absence of darkness but a presence. And, like anything and everything else, it starts inside us. Whatever we haven't found in our hearts, we'll never find 'out there' in the world.

Peace is threefold: with ourselves, with others and with God. They're all an effect and a consequence of each other. They can't be separated. We've got to be at peace with ourselves first – but this is rarer than you might think. If I ask – if each one of us asks – 'Am I at peace with myself?' the answer is quite often going to be: 'No, not really.' That's why we're so often not at peace with others and with God. When we find ourselves unbearable, we find the world unbearable too; but if we manage to find something good and even loveable in ourselves, we'll find it in the world too.

It's not easy, it has to be practised. And if we do try and practice it, it becomes a habit – and Thomas Aquinas said a habit is a part of who you are. It also encourages us to look at other people with a more tolerant, charitable and compassionate eye. We come to understand that:

Mr Grumpy isn't really a miserable old so-and-so: he just doesn't know how to practice being happy – probably because no one has shown him how. Mrs Holier-Than-Thou doesn't really think she's better than everyone else: she just doesn't know how to practice humility – but maybe she hasn't had anyone to guide her. Miss Gossip doesn't really want to destroy other people's dignity or reputation: she just doesn't know how to practice respect – but perhaps that's because nobody has ever shown her any respect. And Mr Moan-Whine-Criticize-Complain-and-Carp doesn't really believe that nothing is good enough: he just doesn't know how to practice being good to himself. Peace, like everything else, begins in the human heart. Which is why Jesus said: 'The Kingdom of God' – with its peace, equality, goodness, justice and love – 'is within you.'