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A Christmas prayer for peace

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

God of peace, to begin, a trove of gratitude. Thank you for the nonviolent Jesus, his arrival among us, his exemplary life of love -- a love that risked death, a love that raised him again to new life. It was a life, all told, that bespoke peace. He came to us in peace, for peace, as peace. In him we see peace first hand. And my heart brims. For in Jesus, our North Star, you have marked our way in a trackless world. A world of violence and inhumanity, chaos and distress. Because of Jesus, it lies within our grasp to know better now.

He taught us how to live and love, pray and serve. How to build community. How to practice nonviolence, resist injustice and suffer with grace. How to forgive the violent and die trusting that, in the fullness of time, we will rise. Here is no mean gift to humanity, and I offer like incense the thanks of my heart. An eternal thank you.

And now, in humility, I offer a plea. Give us anew that Christmas gift of peace on earth.

As I ask it I blanch. For according to heaven's juridical scales, peace lies beyond what we deserve. We lust after war, place our hope and faith in it, enter upon the catharsis of war and mistake it for transcendence. In our war-making we blaspheme your name. We trust our weapons, not You, to protect us.

And dark results follow naturally: the planet warms, the innocent die under bombs, and starvation gallops across forlorn lands like the horsemen of apocalypse. For the time being, for much of America, the

horsemen are a step behind. But time unfolds. By our war-making we decree our own deaths. The empire will fall. We are already falling.

And so I concede. You have us dead to rights; have every cause to ignore our pleas. Our cold hearts are no secret to you. Our sinful ways and our bloody hands, you know them and weep. The consequences of our violence are self-chosen.

And still I dare pray, trusting your goodness. God of peace, for the sake of the nonviolent Jesus, disarm our hearts, our church and our world. Help us veer our lives, our common history, toward your divine peace. Bring us to a new land, one of mutuality and respect and interdependency and plenty for all. No one claiming too much or enduring too little. No overweening wealth or abject lack. No nuclear weapons. No culture of death. A promised land of peace and nonviolence.

Do this for your name's sake, in honor of the nonviolent Jesus. Let his life not be in vain. Help us live as he lived, love as he love, speak as he spoke. Lead us deeper into his story, that our biographies might combine with his, our stories a faithful emulation of his. Fashion us into people in the likeness of Jesus, a nonviolent people. Active, creative, peaceful, joyful, in whose presence the will toward violence shrivels, the will toward nonviolence blooms.

And as for our church -- how does one find the words? My weather eye takes it in, my heart breaks. An institution founded on Jesus' very name, and what bitter irony. It has approvingly traced a cross over an unending series of wars; will likely confer similar blessing upon wars to come. And so, it cracks and falls, lashing out with violence on those nearest and dearest, blind to its infidelity, deaf to the poor.

Nevertheless. Have mercy. Help us, clerics and hierarchs especially, regain an obligation to nurture Jesus' community of Gospel nonviolence. Bestow on us the grace to unclench churchly fists, to let go of power, prestige, possessions, property, ego, and honors. Sweeten the churchly air. Erode domination, ease hostilities, fling open the gates of inclusion. Help us embody Jesus' nonviolent, universal love. Raise up new saints and prophets of peace to stir the fires of peace within.

And one petition more, a plea for the world. Make it one of nonviolence. Unleash over its face your Holy Spirit of disarmament. May it instill tenderness, ties of the heart; may it engender a global movement, an irresistible one, to end wars and dismantle all weapons. May our hearts burn to feed the hungry and heal the sick. May we turn a tender eye toward our marred creation. Let the healing begin anew.

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And may the Spirit instill wisdom. May resolving conflicts peacefully become a coveted skill, well funded, well understood, well practiced. May we not recoil from the mystery that justice often requires a willingness to sacrifice and suffer without retaliation. Help us recover the art, all but plowed under, of giving our lives in love for one another.

Some two thousand years after Jesus' birth, millions are crucified still -- by war, poverty and relievable disease. God of peace, start over again. Let the nonviolent Christ be born in each one of us. Attune our minds to your reign of peace. Place divine peace in our hearts and let us join with the heavenly chorus: "Peace on Earth; glory to God."

Help us, all of us, to engage life with new purpose, new vocation. Send us anew to work to abolish poverty, torture, executions, nuclear weapons, global warming and war. Make us incarnations of your peace. Give us again your Christmas gift of peace. Do this, we beg you.

We ask this in the name of the nonviolent Jesus, our brother and our peace. Amen.

John Dear's column will resume on January 6, 2009. His autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (Loyola Press) and a new collection of his essays on nonviolence, *Put Down Your Sword* (Eerdmans) are available from www.amazon.com. See also, www.persistentpeace.com and www.johndear.org. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

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