

For all four years of high school, I took Latin as my foreign language. And I enjoyed it. I embraced it. I joined a club for it.

Junior Classical League. An organization in which high school uber-nerds, like myself, could immerse themselves in Greco-Roman society. We actually paid money to go to statewide competitions and take tests for hours on end to prove how much we knew about Latin as a language and Rome as a society. And we did it all with a smile on our faces.

So you can imagine, there are more than a few facts about ancient Rome that have stuck with me over the years. Facets of Roman society that still come to mind, particularly when I'm reading scripture. When I'm reading St Paul, who inhabited that society that I learned so much about. When I'm reading him use terms and analogies that trigger faint echoes of one of those tests that I took years and years ago.

And the echo that came to mind during our Epistle reading for today was a term that you may or may not have ever heard before: The Pax Romana. Pax meaning "peace." Romana meaning "Rome." Literally, the peace of Rome.

On the surface, the peace of Rome sounds like an innocuous enough term. Starting with the reign of Caesar Augustus and continuing into the 2nd c. A.D., Rome was at relative peace. The civil wars were over. The period of aggressive expansion was finished. Law and order was spreading. The economy was booming. It was the golden age of the Roman Empire. And so there was peace. The peace of Rome.

And yet, if you looked a little deeper, all was not so peaceful. Because Caesar Augustus did not create this peace through quiet, democratic leadership. He did it by becoming a dictator. A benevolent dictator. But a dictator nonetheless. He ruled with a combination of a keen intellect that could see problems coming ten steps before they occurred, and an iron fist that could crush anything and anyone who stood in his way.

The peace of Rome was about absolute control. Over the central government. Over the regional governors. Over the military. Over the people of Rome.

Over who they worshipped, when they worshipped, how they worshipped. And if an emperor decided that your god did not further the stability of his rule, then he could and would do everything to erase your god from existence. It was called the peace of Rome, but frankly, there was nothing peaceful about it.

And it is within this Pax Romana that Paul is writing. It's within this Pax Romana that the Philippians are living. And they are all looking around themselves and saying, "There is nothing peaceful about this peace. There is nothing peaceful about the constant threat of arrest and persecution and tyranny and suffering."

And yet Paul wants them to rejoice. To rejoice in the Lord always. To let their gentleness be evident, even though they desperately want to fight the Romans who persecute them. To pray in every circumstance and not be overwhelmed by anxiety and fear. He wants all this for them, but he knows that it will be hard for them to hear.

And so he draws a parallel. A parallel to the exact situation that they are in. He tells them, "*The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*"

You hear me say that verse a lot, I say a variation of it at the end of virtually every sermon. But maybe you haven't really heard what it means. So try listening to it as Paul's hearers would have.

They live in a world where the peace of Rome pervades everything. Where a massive system of bureaucracy and tyranny controls their lives. Claiming to guard them and their homes with the power that comes from the might of the Roman Empire. When, in reality, this “guarding” is as much a prison as it is protection.

And into this, Paul says, “I’m not bringing you the peace of Rome that you know so well. I’m bringing you the peace of God that transcends all understanding. And I’m not claiming that this peace will guard your homes and bodies and physical possessions with the power of Rome. I’m claiming that it will guard your hearts and your minds with the power of Jesus Christ.”

And that’s a power that, from the world’s position, may not seem all that different from the Pax Romana. To an unbeliever, God can look an awful lot like a dictator. Imposing His will upon us by might and control and absolute authority.

And to a certain extent, they’re right. God is mighty. He is in control. He is in absolutely authority. And he does impose His will upon us. He dictates and expects the total purity of thought and action that Paul describes so fervently. The peace of God exists because God is sovereign and He cannot be moved.

But that’s a good thing. Because God is not just some human benevolent dictator, corrupted by sinfulness and greed and pride. He is a divine benevolent dictator. He is a perfectly benevolent dictator.

A dictator so benevolent, so concerned with our welfare, that He would come among us for our salvation. As Paul reminded us a few weeks ago, he would empty Himself and take the very form of a servant, that we might know His goodness. He would give up everything, His body, His blood, His very life, to insure that our hearts and minds remain guarded with His power and love.

And that guardianship that He takes, that power that He extends over us, is not the feeble claims of a human authority. The peace of Rome, as impressive and controlling as it was, still only lasted about 200 years, before it collapsed under the weight of corruption and sin, as all human institutions do.

But the peace of God is an eternal peace. Because it is created by the God of peace. It was out of chaos that God created an orderly, peaceful world. It is in God’s nature to bring peace to his children and His creation. And nothing, not sin, not death, not the power of the devil, will stand in His way of accomplishing that goal.

Of bringing to all peoples a rich feast of the finest food, as Isaiah tells us. Of pulling back that shroud of death that has swallowed us for so long. And bringing about an age in which every tear will be wiped away and the turmoil of sadness will be replaced with the peace of joy. The peace of salvation. The peace of God.

Nothing will stand in His way. The God of peace will bring the peace of God. The God of peace **does** bring the peace of God. Even in this sinful world, we still have the opportunity to eat at the rich feast of finest food. To look past the shroud of death and see the joy of eternal life. To look ahead with hope at a world beyond the turmoil of sadness and see the peace of God in its fullness.

We practice the things that God's Word teaches us not under the threat of punishment, but with the promise that the God of peace will be with us. And that is reason enough to rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, Rejoice. That is reason enough to say, *“Surely, this is our God; we trusted in Him, and He saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.”* Amen.